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A NOVEL.

By MRS. JOHN HODDER NEEDELL.

No. 101. September 2, 188

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A NOVEL.

BY Mary Anna (Lupt

MRS. JOHN HODDER NEEDELL.

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JULIAN KARSLAKE'S SECRET.

CHAPTER I.

Two men were sitting together over the dreary embers of a dying fire in the early twilight of a November afternoon. A small table stood between them, covered with loose piles of closely-written manuscript, from which the elder of the two had been reading aloud with such absorbed interest in his employment as to be quite unconscious of the ill-disguised impatience of his listener.

He now leaned back in his chair with a gesture of physical weariness, and, laying his long flexible fingers caressingly on the sheets by his side, surveyed his companion with an expression divided between wistfulness and irritation.

"You do not seem so much impressed by the extracts I have read as I expected," he said; "but then you are scarcely qualified to be a competent critic. You will at least undertake my commission?"

"I will undertake it, of course; only I wash my hands of all responsibility as regards success or failure. You will be wise to expect the latter."

He rose as he spoke, pulling up the collar of his coat and shivering with intention.

"You have left the fire down with a vengeance, Dorrimore, oblivious of vulgar sensations in your intellectual zeal; and yet if ever a cheerful blaze were wanted it is in such a den as this. I never come here but I wonder how life sustains itself under such conditions."

He went up to the window and peered out into the semi-darkness; there was just light enough to discern the outline of objects.

A lawn of unusual extent,—level as theodolite could make

27 X 225

Fiction, English

it,—and surrounded on three sides with a belt of evergreens. The choice pines and delicate conifers were overgrown and irregular for want of judicious pruning and thinning out, and the outlines of the flower-beds,—once cut with geometric exactness in the velvet turf,—were now scarcely visible in the long unmown grass, and were destitute of growth save where weeds had made an easy conquest of the soil.

The broad gravelled walk which divided the house from the lawn was saturated with moisture, and so thickly coated with rank vegetation as to be scarcely distinguishable from the grass itself. The whole outlook had that singularly forlorn and depressing aspect produced by a scene originally planned for luxury and pleasure, but abandoned to absolute neglect.

To look within was to confirm the impression. The room was large and lofty, with ample conveniences for the library of a wealthy and exacting student, but the book-shelves of curiously-carved oak, reaching from floor to ceiling, were for the most part empty, except in one corner where a few score of volumes were scattered over the affluent space. Pedestals, intended for bust or statue, stood void and purposeless, and deep in dust, save where their blank surfaces were utilized as receptacles for domestic litter,—thus giving the finishing touch of incongruity and disorder to the scene. The once-polished floor of the same sombre wood was dirt-stained and carpetless, and the large mullioned window, facing west, was without blind or drapery of any description. A substantial library-table covered with books and papers, and the thickly-padded chair which matched it, and in which the elder man was seated, were the only comfortable articles of furniture in the bare and meagre apartment.

Mr. Dorrimore watched his companion with an air of contemptuous impatience: he had an author's passion for his work, and wished to discuss it, but it was hard to force the subject on the obvious indifference of the other. When he at length turned round from his post of observation it was to make the altogether irrelevant remark,—

"It is evident the children don't often play round here."

"I should think not; Sybil takes care my leisure is not disturbed."

"*And who* takes care of Sybil's leisure? What does she *do with herself* in a hole of the earth like this?"

He moved away from the window and came back to the fireplace, throwing on a log of wood from a pile in the corner, and scattering the smouldering ashes right and left.

"If you could manage to tuck me up anywhere for the night, Dorrimore, I would have a chat with Sybil and a romp with the children."

"The thing is impossible, though I am more sorry than I can express. We swarm with animal life, and Hannah rules us with a rod of iron. I dare not suggest such an idea."

"Then, during the half-hour it will take you to pack up your papers, and the driver to put in his wretched hack, I will at any rate find my way to the nursery. The swarm would not forgive me, if they knew Uncle Helstone had come and gone without counting them over. Perhaps there may be one or two missing since I was here last."

Mr. Dorrimore rose from his chair as if to oppose his intention, but there was something in the easy determination of the other that did not look like denial, and he sat down again.

Helstone glanced round the room to see if he could discover anything in the shape of a light, and, observing a small spirit-lamp on the high mantel above his head, took it down and prepared to light it at the failing embers with considerable solicitude.

"I look on these lamps," he remarked, "as an invention of the Evil One: they betray you into darkness on the least provocation. I should prefer a dip and flat candlestick if I were a student."

"They are cheaper even than dips: a flat candlestick is an investment in comparison."

"You will excuse my leaving you in the dark, for I have not a moment to spare. Will you ring for another light, and order the trap round? If I am to catch my train to-night I must be off in half an hour. Thanks; I know my way."

He crossed the long room with a firm, elastic tread. Outside of it he stood in a large, bare hall of fine proportions and with a tessellated pavement of black and white marble. A livid ray of light from the faint sunset sky fell across the floor, and touched the lowest steps of the ample stone staircase which rose with a circular sweep to the upper stories of the house.

Helstone cleared the shallow ascent with a few inclusive strides, cherishing his feeble lamp carefully from the perils of the strong currents of air that met him on the wide landings. He crossed a long corridor with closed doors on either side, and made his way, being evidently familiar with the locality, to a room at the extreme end of the house, and from the half-open door of which came the cheerful guidance of peals of childish laughter and the ruddy glow of fire-light.

He deposited his lamp in an angle of the wall, pushed the door open a little wider, and peeped in unobserved.

A large long room, with a wide unshuttered mullioned window at one end, and at the other a blazing fire of ash and fir-cones roaring up the huge chimney and casting fantastic effects of dancing lights and shadows. A round oaken table, without cloth, but bright as elbow-grease could make it, was spread for tea, which was evidently to consist of the home-made loaf, fresh butter, and pitcher of new milk, which were already placed upon it.

Spoons and knives were obviously at a premium, and the crockery was of the most promiscuous and inadequate description, but that was of small consequence to the eager spirits and healthy appetites that were soon to gather round the board.

Look at the group,—as full of vitality, mental and physical, as the warmest friends of the human race could wish them. Two lads who looked like twins, so exactly were they matched in height and feature, stood in a loose embrace and attitude of critical attention, watching what appeared to be a dramatic representation of Mother Hubbard and her dog. A girl, of about seventeen, was enacting the drama, aided by a clever little Skye terrier, with so much spirit and success as to call forth shouts of laughter from a trio of younger children, who occupied the floor between her and the fire-light.

At the moment Helstone looked in, the dog had reached the flute-playing phase of his history, the flute being represented by a carefully whittled stick, and was standing on end, grasping the same between his front paws with a grave propriety—the outcome of many previous failures—which brought down rounds of applause from the house. But the girl's face, with its expression of half-stupefied astonishment passing *slowly into* triumphant recognition of the gifts displayed by he remarkable quadruped, was admirable, though probably hrown away as too fine a touch upon her audience.

Helstone, however, clapped his hands with enthusiasm, and hus betrayed his concealment. There was a moment's sudden —almost dread—silence; then, as the children recognized him, here was a shout of welcome and a promiscuous rush. The oom rang with rapturous shouts of "Uncle Helstone! Uncle Helstone!" from the boys' clear treble to the tender pipe of he four-year-old girl.

"There! there!" he cried, struggling to free himself from he encircling limbs that were either grasping or scaling his six feet of height; "let me breathe! I have only half an hour to spare, and lots to say. Sybil, are you glad to see me?"

"Too glad! Papa never told us you were coming." And the girl lifted up a face so radiant with spirit and expression that its beauty seemed quite a secondary consideration.

"Of course you will have some tea? Sit down, children, and show how well I have taught you to behave. I hope you like new milk and brown bread, for that is what we always have."

"And so would I too if I could get them. Why, here are luxuries money can't buy,—your own butter and Hannah's matchless bread!"

He drew up a chair to the table and began to attack the loaf.

"It's well money can't buy them," said Sybil, with a delicate smile, "or we should stand small chance of getting them."

"And," cried one of the boys, "isn't it a burning shame, Uncle Helstone? Papa says he shall sell Viper, for a man has offered five pounds for him, and, more than that, he isn't worth the tax. Not—worth—the—tax!"

He spoke with a flushed cheek and in a tone of trenchant derision, but Helstone could see it was only his incipient manhood that kept the tears from his eyes and the sob from his voice. He glanced at Sybil, who was busy pouring out the milk into the respective vessels and distributing them with noiseless dexterity, and he fancied her lip quivered a little.

"Ah, well," he said, coolly, "I didn't know it was Mother Hubbard's dog when I bid for it. However, I can't go back from a bargain! Your father must have his price, and the nimal is mine to do what I like with. Will you take him back again, Sybil, as a present from me—to please the children?"

There was a shout of triumph, and a simultaneous rush upon the ransomed treasure.

Sybil's eyes sparkled with delight.

"Will I? It is the very kindest thing you could have done for us. But—are you very rich, Uncle Helstone? Can you afford it—quite conveniently?"

"Rich as a Jew, Sybil, whenever inclination comes into play. But order the children back to their places, and, while they are munching their bread-and-butter, come into the window-seat and let us have five minutes' talk together."

He drew her away to the farther end of the apartment, and, making her sit down on the broad bench in the deep embrasure of the mullioned window, stood before her, looking at her with a mixed expression of curiosity and tenderness.

"Then it's the same old game," he said, at last; "the master washes his hands of all responsibility, and leaves the vulgar cares of family life to you and old Hannah? I am bound to own you don't look like sinking under the burden. I have barely time to say two words: is there anything you or the children want? Are you fairly happy, child?"

"As the days are long, and often I don't find them half long enough for what I have to do. Do we want anything? Heaps of things that Uncle Helstone could not give us, but that we all do very well without. Jack and Tom could not laugh more merrily had they the best new overcoats in the world, and, to my mind, Bertie, Lucy, and baby could not look prettier under any circumstances whatever."

"And you?"—surveying the slight, tall figure from head to foot, with a vague masculine perception that the dress she wore was somehow inadequate in warmth, texture, and effect.

"I? What does it signify? I have a better frock than this, and we never by any chance see anybody. When I am teaching the children, or papa is teaching me, or I am reading to him, my appearance doesn't count for much."

Insensibly the bright voice dropped a little, and as she met Helstone's intense gaze of observation the color suddenly flushed into her face.

"*I see what* it is," she said, with a little laugh: "you are *thinking how* shabby I look."

"Heaven forbid you should know what I was thinking! But"—looking at his watch impatiently—"do you still teach the boys?"

"At present; papa says he can't afford to send them to school, and that I can ground them in the rudiments as well as he; besides, they are very quick. He still gives me lessons, and he must have time for his great work."

Helstone's lip curled. "How great? I am taking a portion up to town to show to some of the *savants* and sound a publisher. It will not succeed, of course; that is,"—seeing the swift look of dismay on her face,—"too many have attempted the task before to encourage the hope that Mr. Dorrimore will succeed where they have failed. But you needn't attach much weight to my opinion: I am not a Greek scholar like him and you, Sybil."

"No," said she, quietly, "and you lose a great deal thereby,—for yourself, I mean: we could not like you better."

At this moment the door opened, and Hannah, the inclusive help of the household, came in to say the trap had just gone round to the front door, and master had sent her to tell Mr. Helstone.

"But, goodness knows, sir," she added, "it's a treat for sore eyes to see you once more; and how pleased the blessed babbies must have been!"

Helstone shook the good woman cordially by the hand, dexterously conveying into the honest palm a substantial token of his good will, which he well knew from former experience would be employed in the children's service, and with some difficulty got himself away from the clamor of affectionate lamentation. His last words were to the twins, and they were *sotto voce*,—

"Write to me, boys, if things go wrong, or you or your sister want anything. Hannah knows my address."

CHAPTER II.

EIGHT years before the incidents just related, Herbert Dorrimore had deliberately given up his professional struggles as an all but briefless barrister, and withdrawn himself and his family from their hard experiences of London existence, under the conditions of debt and poverty, to the profound seclusion of country life in a remote southwestern county.

A friend had offered him the old manor-house, known in the neighborhood as Ashlands, for a merely nominal rent, induced to the step by the conviction that Dorrimore was a scholar and genius overweighted by vulgar cares, who only needed the opportunities of leisure and retirement to do great things, and remunerative things as well.

In point of fact, the chief subsistence of the family depended not on his profession, which had never brought him in a hundred guineas since he had been called to the bar some fifteen years before, but on the proceeds of his fitful and eccentric pen; and, since his specialty was neither the reviewing of novels nor the writing of leading articles, his work could be carried on as well in the provinces as in the capital.

Dorrimore caught at the offer eagerly, without much consultation with his wife, who, according to his estimate, had early merged her individuality — never strongly marked — into that of her children, and seemed to have absorbed every human interest in the cares and compensations of her rapidly-filling nursery.

The eighteen months that Mrs. Dorrimore lived after their removal to Ashlands were the happiest in her experience since marriage. By the sale of every article of value they possessed, their old liabilities were wiped out, and although the result was that their new home was furnished with a meagreness that left them destitute of many of the necessary accessories of life, yet this was little to her mind in comparison with the blessed freedom from that pecuniary care which had sapped the springs of health and cheerfulness during her London career.

Then, again, she had been country-born and bred, and made the best of the certainly favorable circumstances in which she found herself so unexpectedly placed. There was a farm of about twelve acres attached to the house, and she had the rare good fortune to find an honest, hard-working couple who were equal to the management of the small demesne between them.

The woman was frugal, capable, and industrious, and made no objection to undertake the duties of the house single-handed, save for the efficient help rendered by her tall, fair, and energetic mistress; the man was above his class in intelligence, and gave good advice as to the best and most productive course to be adopted with the land. Under his instructions two cows were purchased, which were as much as Mrs. Dorrimore's finances would allow, and in order to do this she surreptitiously disposed of certain trinkets that still survived the wreck of their fortunes; the pasture would have borne six, but for such a consummation they had to await the tardy multiplication of benignant nature, which the poor lady herself never lived to see fully realized. By such means not only was the house liberally supplied with new milk and butter, as well as with homely fresh vegetables from the excellent kitchen-garden,—new and rare luxuries to the town-reared family,—but there was a gradually increasing surplus of these commodities for sale, on the product of which all other additions to their commissariat and family necessities depended. Occasionally their means would be augmented by casual investments, such as the purchase of a few suck-lambs, bought each season from the nearest shepherd, ostensibly as playthings for the children, but with an ultimate view to the profit of the household.

As for Mr. Dorrimore, he by degrees made it to be understood that his literary privacy was inviolable, and that he shook himself free from all participation in the practical conduct of affairs. He gave his wife, whose new-developed energy occasioned a half-contemptuous surprise, *carte blanche* to manage matters as she pleased so long as he was spared all consultation and annoyance; at long intervals he would give her money, perhaps ten or twenty pounds at a time, according to the proceeds of some unusually successful article; and this was his chief contribution to the expenses of his family. The pity was he would not write what he knew would pay, unless driven by stress of pecuniary pressure to the humiliation of literary pot-boiling, his whole heart and intellect being absorbed in the laborious task of a new translation of the Iliad.

He was an admirable Greek scholar, it is true, but he had neither the breadth of mind, nor delicate subtilty of brain, nor native gift of rhythm, sufficient to insure brilliant success or paramount superiority over those who had ploughed the same field before him.

One other duty he performed,—the education of his eldest child, to which he devoted himself with an ardor excited and sustained by the brilliant capacity and singular beauty of the little girl. Sybil Dorrimore had been her father's pupil from the time she was four years old. He taught her the Greek before the English alphabet, and pleased himself with the idea of reproducing in her the prodigies of erudition attained by other gifted children under similar experiences. He had his reward: at an age when other children are stumbling over the multiplication table, she had tripped lightly across the *pons asinorum*, with brain alert and adequate for the pursuit of that beloved science which divided his zeal with classical scholarship.

At fourteen she had paraphrased Lucretius, and her eager and precocious intellect had forced her into premature and passionate sympathy with the majestic sublimity of Æschylus.

It was well for the result of this severe and sustained mental pressure that nature had endowed her with a superb physical constitution, and that her interest in out-door pursuits and occupations led to her being in the open air as much as possible, and qualified her intense student life. Then her affections were of a warm, natural, and generous type: she loved her little brothers and sisters with a magnanimous unselfishness that made scarcely any denial or effort hard in their service. Indeed, she did not know, so limited was her experience of other lives, how unusual were the requirements made upon her.

After her mother's death the burden of the household management fell upon her childish shoulders, so far as mental prevision went. Hannah, indeed, constituted herself the all but ubiquitous house-mistress of the establishment, in which no other change occurred except the providing of a nurse-girl for the lovely six-months-old baby which poor Mrs. Dorrimore *had left behind* her.

The student-father buried himself more profoundly in his library than before, salving his conscience against its reproaches for his selfish apathy by devoting nearly the whole of his narrow personal income to the physical needs of his family and reducing his own wants within the narrowest compass.

They led a strange, self-reliant life. No one visited them, except at rare intervals their mother's kinsman, Gilbert Helstone, and they never went out to other houses.

Their home was, as we have said, in a remote part of a southwestern county, and a mile from the village, in which there was no other gentleman's house but the vicarage. One or two farm-houses stood near, but it was certain that neither Mr. Dorrimore nor Sybil would care to make friends of their occupants; and the few county families of the district altogether refused to acknowledge their impoverished and scrambling existence.

It was a strange experience for a beautiful and gifted girl: she stepped out of childhood into the adult and exhausting anxieties of narrow means; and if, in her case, they did not quench the brightness of her spirit, it was simply because of the abundant elasticity and resolution of her natural endowments, in addition to her positive ignorance of different conditions.

It often happened that, when constrained to make a direct appeal to her father for money, she was met by a statement of his absolute inability to meet her requirements, while on those rare occasions when he was able to do otherwise he was apt to survey her from head to foot with a discontented expression, and to add the injunction that part of the fund should be spent "in buying herself something decent to wear."

But there were so many of them that wanted decent apparel, and Sybil always seized these occasions to set them all up in new boots and shoes, which was a terrible pull upon the fund; and Hannah also was sure to have in reserve some pressing demand which absorbed the residue.

But, after all, they cared little for dress or company either; they were as happy as the birds of the air and as full of resource as active brains and bright natures could make them; and in their different and desultory ways the whole brood loved books and study, whenever from any cause the out-door world was under a ban.

Sybil in great measure was the family tutor, but they all had the happy art—only to be found among children at the same time clever and neglected—of teaching themselves and of teaching one another. The twin boys were about this time twelve years old, five years younger than their eldest sister,—a boy and two girls having been born and died between them. One of her chief anxieties was the education and career of her brothers, whom her father still obstinately persisted in considering and treating as children. It was probably with some vague idea of helping their future that, as time passed and developed her nascent capacities, she betook herself secretly to authorship. She had succeeded in furnishing after a fashion the large, disused drawing-room of the house, which had the same aspect and proportions as her father's study, and she passed hours of concentrated occupation and delight over an old library-table which had been transferred for her use to this apartment and was in perfect keeping with its heterogeneous contents.

And of what value, do you ask, were the crude lucubrations of a girl in her eighteenth year, and which girl was also a recluse? Stop a moment, and consider what some of our most honorable names in literature have not only promised but achieved at that age, and take into account likewise the training she had received. She had been drilled from infancy in linguistic criticism on the basis of the most subtile and complete of human tongues. Not only could she read Greek tragedy, but she had been taught to scan its heights and plumb its depths with a disciplined faculty which stood her in good stead when it came to finding adequate expression for her own ideas. Grant that her personal experience of life was singularly narrow, her imagination was vigorous and intuition keen: ignorant of the social world in its practical manifestations, she was versed in the literature of the day under all its multiform aspects,—new books being the only luxury that ever found its way into their house,—and was well read in the dramas of the old playwrights and the virile romances of the last generation.

Add something more: she had studied and loved Shakspeare from a child; that is to say, she had sat at the feet of the master whose mind is still the horizon beyond which none of us—poet, philosopher, or otherwise—are able to project our own.

Enough: what she wrote was printed and paid for, she being naturally well acquainted with the modes of negotiation between writer and editor; and the small sums thus obtained were a valuable addition to their straitened means.

From some scarcely defined motive, Sybil kept the secret of her authorship and its success, and the impression in the family was, when these casual windfalls occurred, that the father's hand had bestowed them.

CHAPTER III.

"LET the children read the New Testament, Sybil, and teach them the Lord's prayer."

This was the sum of Herbert Dorrimore's religious solicitude in regard to his family, and so far Sybil, in the first flush of mental and physical strength, was unconscious of moral or spiritual deficiency. Her healthful and highly-endowed organization was not of the type that possesses inherently a profound sense of the supernatural; there was no strong bias in her mind towards "obstinate questionings," no eager looking before or after, no tendency towards mystic aspiration. She was thoroughly content with what this perishable and imperfect world gave her. It naturally followed from this training that attendance upon the formal services of the Church had never been considered by the household in the light of either a duty or a privilege, and circumstances had hitherto forbidden its taking rank as a pleasure.

The vicar of Roosden Magna was a man of good birth and weak health, who devolved almost all his parish duties upon a quick succession of youthful curates, none of whom remained long enough on duty to assimilate themselves either to the people or to their work, and whose indiscriminate dismissal was popularly attributed to the fickleness or irritability of their superior. "Our new curate" was a stereotyped phrase at Roosden Magna.

Occasionally, during the progress of years and the growth of independent action, some stragglers from the Ashlands family would go to church, just as chance or humor dictated, but the services were so uniformly flat and spiritless that it would be long before the attempt was repeated; added to which, their domestic arrangements and frequently insufficient attire would have served as grave obstacles to regular attendance. At the date, however, which we have now reached, two circumstances had conduced to render Sybil Dorrimore's appearance in the old family pew, with the younger children as her companions, an event of more frequent occurrence.

The money-tree, watered by a brilliant little sketch of hers in one of the leading magazines, had borne so abundantly, according to her limited notions, that she had been able to make substantial additions to the family wardrobe, and to supply herself with a blue serge dress of unusual excellence, and a broad felt hat in keeping with the same. Secondly, the curate then in charge was more endurable to her fastidious judgment than any of his predecessors had been, and in the entire absence of other like interests she felt a cold, critical curiosity in watching his manifestations. He had been in the parish longer than at one time would have been thought possible for the Hon. and Rev. Aubrey de Grey to endure the same face and the same voice in perpetual intercourse, being now in the third year of his office; and he was in a large and altogether unprecedented measure popular among the people. He was reported to be very kind to the poor, to visit the sick dutifully, and to bear with the vicar's exacting and difficult temper with exemplary patience and tact. Further than this her knowledge did not go, though, if so disposed, she could have learned much more concerning him. He had several times called upon her father, but she had not cared to come into personal contact with him, and contented herself with carelessly wondering how the Rev. Julian Karslake made his visits acceptable to the querulous student who was accustomed to shut himself off entirely from intercourse with the outside world. Now and again she met him in her walks with the children, but he had never made any attempt to stop and speak to them: a conventional salute in passing had seemed recognition enough for all parties concerned.

Great, then, was her dismay when late one afternoon in the early spring-time, just eighteen months after Gilbert Helstone's last visit to Ashlands, as she was sitting before her desk in pleased enjoyment of her privacy, she heard the click of the garden gate, and in another moment the shadow of the coming guest fell across her page.

She knew instinctively it must be Julian Karslake, for no other stranger ever crossed the threshold of their door, and at the same time the recollection occurred to her that Hannah and all the children were gone out for a walk, that her father had strictly charged her he was not to be disturbed, and therefore that she must not only admit but entertain the visitor herself.

He had already rung the bell and was waiting for admission outside, but she was bound to keep him waiting longer while she buried her books and papers out of sight, hid an old jacket which she was going to mend presently and which was too disreputable for any alien vision, and made a general abortive dash to reduce the complex disorder of the room to some outward show of decency.

But it was a forlorn hope, and all the hurry and failure of the attempt was in the flushed face of the girl as she at last reluctantly opened the door and stood before her visitor.

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting so long, but our servant is out, and my father is particularly engaged."

Her aspect and tone had a sweet inherent graciousness, but she stood barring his entrance into the house as she spoke, her impression being that he would retire at once on hearing her curt announcement.

"Then may I not come in?" he asked. "I did not wish to intrude on Mr. Dorrimore. My object to-day was to ask for an interview with you. I am singularly fortunate in finding you at home."

He held his hat in his hand as he spoke to her, and the keen east wind stirred the hair on his uncovered head: an impulse of hospitality induced Sybil to make way for him, and mitigated the surprise of his address.

"You wish to speak to me?" retreating into the interior of the hall and laying her hand on the lock of the drawing-room door: "then will you please to come in here? There is no fire, and it is not very comfortable. I am sorry, but I have no better place to show you into."

"I am not cold," he said, as he was in duty bound to say; "and I should very much like to come in."

There was obviously no escape, and they entered, and as they did so, and Sybil saw his glance traverse the room in one quick survey, a ray of illumination struck her, and she perceived all the indications of sordid poverty and accumulated deficiency as she had never done before. How must it all strike him whose social position was said by public report to be equal to that of the vicar himself, and whose perfect dress, high-bred physique, and composed manner all implied his familiarity with such a different order of things?

He was still standing hat in hand, for indeed she had not asked him to sit down, her supreme consciousness at that moment being that his eye was caught by the aspect of the huge fireless grate, where Hannah had recently hung some tawdry paper abomination which gave the finishing touch of vulgarity and deliberate discomfort to the scene.

A new sensation, keen as a pang, passed through her frame; but she rallied her pride, raised her head with an indefinable gesture, and said, with a smile,—

"It hurts my feelings, Mr. Karslake, to see you looking at our miserable fireplace, but please don't accredit me with its barbarism. I wish you had seen it in the summer-time, when it was filled with ferns and flowers after a private device of my own. You must know we don't often have a fire here, and this is Hannah's way of hiding the nakedness of the land."

She paused, then added, in a lower tone, and one that indicated some latent feeling in spite of her wish to speak lightly,—

"I do not doubt you know how naked the land is."

"Such estimates are purely conventional," was the reply: "one man sees deficiency where another is only able to perceive abundance."

"You are very good to say so, but there is hardly room for two opinions in our case. I have wondered now and then what the people in the village say about us. I know they resent our poverty very much. You see we live in a big house, which before our time was occupied by some rich aboriginal family who did good all around and left a vacancy felt to this day. We have always been aliens."

Here she stopped, suddenly aware that her visitor was listening to her with a critical intentness that caused her rather surprise than embarrassment.

"*You have taken* great pains," he said, "to maintain the alienation. During the last two years I have felt what may seem to you a very gratuitous interest in all the external details of your life, so far as they could come under the notice of an outside observer, and you have always appeared to me to rejoice in your independence of all your surroundings."

Sybil smiled a little sarcastically.

"Surely," she answered, "your interest must have starved for want of supplies."

"The stress of starvation stimulates ingenuity, Miss Dorrimore, and at Roosden Magna there are few opposing interests."

He paused, looked at her anew with a searching earnestness of regard, and added, in a lower and more deliberate tone, to which the singular sweetness of his voice and the faultless purity of his accent gave an almost resistless charm,—

"I believe I know more about you than you would think possible. I know you are a better Greek scholar than myself,—which may be but a very doubtful compliment,—for I have seen some very clever Homeric paraphrases and renderings of yours. I know, besides, that you are a capable critic, as I have watched the changes of distaste and weariness in your face when listening to my poor sermons; also that you are an admirable story-teller, as I have heard you more than once in the church porch with your little brothers and sisters about you, while I have been kept prisoner in the vestry by the spell. I am even familiar with your handwriting, from constant attendance at the village post-office. I have met you summer and winter, alone or more frequently in the company of the children, and never without receiving some keener impression of the brightness and power of your influence."

At this point he ceased, as if to give her the opportunity of reply, and Sybil, who had followed his speech with increasing astonishment, said, with scarcely repressed indignation,—

"You also know probably that I am a girl standing almost alone in the world, and quite unaccustomed to polite society and its pleasant amenities, otherwise you would scarcely venture to talk to me in this unusual and point-blank manner. Would not the ladies in your circle resent it as an impertinence?"

"I *cannot say*; I have never tested their forbearance; but

I must not allow you to think it an impertinence. I fear I am a very poor diplomatist, and must have spoken very badly, if I have been so unfortunate as to have already incurred your displeasure. What I have just now said, I meant as some kind of prelude or explanation to what is to follow, and that—however it gets said—will seem to you, I fear, incredibly presumptuous and unconventional."

Here he put down his hat and came a little nearer to the window where Sybil was standing. A pale ray from the fading saffron of the skies fell across his person, and she was quite cool enough to mark how fair and tall and straight her new companion was. The feeling uppermost in her mind was the displeasure of a proud and sensitive girl, slightly modified by curiosity.

"I have heard he was eccentric," she said to herself.

"I scarcely know," he went on, "what words to use or how to defend myself from anger or misconception. Let me ask if you have heard that I am called suddenly away to attend the death-bed of a relative?"

"I did not know. I am very sorry," she said, coldly.

"I am not sure I shall ever come back to take up my old duties here, and it is this that has led to the step I have ventured to take to-day. I was quite resolved not to go away without speaking to you. Will you bear in mind what I have already told you, that I know more of you, of your real self, than a score of conventional meetings in ball-rooms, on garden-lawns, or at the afternoon tea-table could have taught me? Add to the rest this: I have often visited your farm-servant and heard anecdotes of you from your childhood upwards; and now will you promise not hastily to resent, but to take into generous and reasonable consideration, what I am going to say?"

He paused; a sudden glow flushed the healthy pallor of his cheek; his hitherto mild and deliberate glance scintillated and quickened.

"Is it necessary," he asked, in a low tone, but one that vibrated with repressed and passionate feeling, "for a man to excuse and palliate as an offence the supremest proof he can give of his loyalty and truth? Simply, I come to tell you I love you, Miss Dorrimore, and to ask your pardon, not for the *fact, but for* the long concealment of the same, and for the strange abruptness with which I have at last announced it. You may well believe this reserve has been the result not of caprice, but of hard necessity. Stop, I implore you, before you answer. All I want now is that you should listen patiently to what I have told you, and suffer me in the future to do what lies in my power to reconcile you to the idea of one day becoming my wife."

He spoke now with that complete control of emotion which was characteristic of the man under the strongest excitement; but none the less was Sybil aware that it was rather force of will than lack of feeling that kept outward manifestation in check. Beneath this impression her displeasure yielded to a confused sense of difficulty and pain. How the girl of the period ought to behave in circumstances so unique and unconventional she had not the slightest idea; she followed the natural movement of a frank and courageous mind.

"I think," she answered, with a certain sweet gravity that kindled his admiration to the point of pain, "you have taken rather an ungenerous advantage of my solitary position. It is very hard to understand why you did not tell me this before, or at least try to know me personally. I fancy few girls would believe what you have just now said to me; they would think you were playing some unmanly joke, or winning some shameful bet; but, strange as it all is, I do believe you."

Then, as the admission passed her lips, and the sense of all that it implied flashed upon her mind, her equanimity was troubled; the color deepened on her cheek, and a sudden suffusion dimmed the clear steadfastness of gaze she had fixed upon his face.

"It was scarcely well," she added, turning a little aside, "to force upon me so strange and painful a situation."

"Is it of necessity painful?" he asked, and there was an inflection in his tone that made Sybil glance towards him again.

"It is painful to me to tell you, believing you in earnest, that I can do nothing more than thank you for the good opinion you entertain of me. I am not at all the sort of girl to whom the ideas of love and marriage would be welcome under any circumstances; I am pledged to quite another sort of life, and—with a smile—"I like the life to which I am *pledged.*"

"That is to say, you propose to sacrifice your life to the interests of your family,—pardon me, Miss Dorrimore. Or is it that I individually have no chance of pleasing you? Surely it is premature to decide against me on this the first occasion of our speaking together! All I ask is leave to know you better; I must go away to-morrow, but you will not forbid my coming to see you again on my return?"

He approached her, not with any presumptuous idea of even touching her hand, though his whole being yearned towards her, but simply to read the expression of her face more clearly in the waning light.

"I can wait," he added, in his clear and penetrating accents,—"for I have the proper temperament for a despised lover, at once tenacious and constant, but—I shall persist."

Sybil looked up quickly. "I think I know you well enough already, Mr. Karslake, to feel sure you will not persist one moment after you are convinced you are giving me pain. You are doing that now; I would rather we did not meet any more: it is no question of sacrifice to my family,—my whole heart is theirs,—it would be an impossible thing for me to desert my sisters and brothers."

"But they should be mine: I will assure their future more certainly than you could do. I am moderately rich, and free from all personal family ties——." His face clouded for a moment as with an involuntary reminiscence of pain.

Sybil smiled and shook her head. "Thank you for such a generous and inclusive proposal, but we will bear our own burdens. I would not suffer any man to accept such a responsibility as that: it is right it should rest where nature has placed it. Nor is this quite all: my father would never consent to part with me: I am sometimes vain enough to think he could scarcely live without me."

"Your father," he repeated; and then he looked into the speaker's vivid face, and an indefinable expression contracted his brow. At the same moment, to her infinite relief, Sybil heard the sound of opening doors and the eager voices of the children. Julian Karslake heard them too, and took up his hat to depart.

"I should like to escape the observation of your keen-eyed youngsters," he said, with a quiet smile, "which I can do by *letting myself* out at the front door. For the rest, I shall come back, Miss Dorrimore; there are many things unsaid, to which I shall ask you to give another hearing."

He bowed without any attempt at further farewell, stopped on his way out to pick up a book that had fallen upon the floor, and disappeared in the twilight.

CHAPTER IV.

On the third morning after Julian Karslake's visit, Sybil, on entering her father's study at the usual time, found it unoccupied. Mr. Dorrimore's student-habits were so regular that the mere fact of not finding him in his accustomed place at his accustomed hour had the effect of a surprise.

Moreover, she had a special interest in her studies that morning; she held in her hand a Greek exercise, on which she had bestowed an immense amount of labor and enthusiasm, and was keenly anxious for his estimate of the same.

Like others before and since, she had been charmed by the singular power and tenderness of the scene between the shades of Agamemnon and Iphigenia, as attempted by Aspasia in rivalry of Æschylus in Landor's matchless work, and had conceived the idea of putting it into Greek, and thus, as it were, restoring to the poem its original and appropriate investment.

When we say her whole heart had been in the task, it will show how little the late remarkable interview had disturbed the current of her life. In short, after one half-hour's concentrated reflection, she had dismissed the matter as something to be put outside the pale of her accepted experiences and which should never be allowed to enter therein again.

Sybil looked anxiously round the room for some indication of her father's recent presence, and, perceiving none, went towards the library-table, which stood in the recess formed by the large window, to deposit her papers upon it: in so doing she naturally looked towards the gardens beyond, and saw to her surprise that Mr. Dorrimore was pacing up and down the gravel walk outside, his hands clasped beneath the flaps of his old study gown, and his head bowed in evidently profound cogitation.

It was an exquisite morning in the beginning of April, tempting enough to win any student from his books; but as she stood and watched her father, Sybil had a curious perception that it was neither the beauty of the day nor even any intellectual pressure or perplexity which had led to this unusual proceeding. Presently he looked up and saw her.

"Come out," he said; "I want to speak to you;" and in another moment she was by his side, drinking in with conscious delight the airs from Paradise which blew around her, the scent of wild violets which grew in clusters in the unweeded borders beneath the windows of the house, the tender green of the budding trees, and the unflecked, translucent azure of the sky.

At that instant a solitary bird came in sight, and cut the air above their heads with a swift but almost imperceptible sweep of wing.

"Look!" cried Sybil, eagerly; "it is a swallow,—the first I have seen, the earliest I ever saw. Why, it is only the 12th of April! He comes, I hope, as the harbinger of a splendid summer."

Mr. Dorrimore turned sharply round.

"One would think you were a child, Sybil; and yet you have given me a very convincing proof of the contrary. How am I to understand a girl capable of practising the reserve that you have done one day, and going into puerile raptures over the advent of a swallow the next?"

For a moment she was at a loss to discover his meaning, but he helped her understanding by drawing out his folded hands from the skirts of his coat and showing an open letter in one of them. He held it towards her: it was of considerable length, and the writing singularly clear and fine in character.

"Do you know the handwriting?" he asked.

A complex tumult of feeling of a passionate intensity hitherto unknown to her experience stirred her soul. She straightened instinctively her tall, lithe figure into an attitude of resistance, the delicate tint of her cheek deepened to carmine, the soft brilliancy of her glance quickened and glowed.

"I have never to my knowledge seen it before, but I conclude the letter is from the Rev. Julian Karslake."

"*And you* can guess the purport of the same? Child, why did you not tell me at once of the offer he had made you? Recluse as I am, I had heard of his leaving Roosden Magna, and could not understand his conduct; this letter here, I am happy to say, restores my confidence in his good faith and sincerity, but it is written under the impression that my daughter has not kept me in the dark."

He stood still, turned and looked at her. The drift of his words had changed the current of her feelings; the face she now raised towards him was pale and set.

"What am I to understand?" she asked. "Can he have spoken to you on this subject, and you have given him any encouragement?—the idea seems impossible!"

"And if he have, and I have given him a civil hearing," replied Mr. Dorrimore, testily, "what have you to complain of? Am not I the proper person to whom my daughter's suitors should apply? And do you think me so selfish as to stand between you and an advantageous marriage, however great may be my personal loss?"

The last words seemed to be thrown in as a saving clause, and aggravated her sense of cruel disappointment.

"I had thought," she said, "that you would never have contemplated the prospect of my leaving you with satisfaction, or, still more, have supposed me base enough to abandon my brothers and sisters at the first chance. It hurts me dreadfully that you can speak so easily of letting me go; not but that the thing is impossible: I am not going to be cast off."

"Sybil, my dear girl, you view the matter in a very perverse light. Do not all parents reckon upon the pain of parting with their children, without being reproached for hardness of heart? Heaven knows I shall miss you more than words can express, but I shall weigh against that loss the falling off from my shoulders of a growing burden of care and trouble."

"As how?" she demanded, eagerly. "Surely my presence at home makes your work and cares lighter?"

"My *present* cares," he answered; "but time is running on, and the boys must go to school. Putting puny earnings and miserable income together, I can't see my way to sending them. Then do you suppose I have grown blind over my books? I see you growing into womanhood, not only with *gifts but graces beyond* the common, and know it is out of my power to give any of the pleasures and opportunities of your age and sex. I can't answer it to my conscience to keep you much longer at home as the perpetual governess of the children and with no knowledge of the world outside the ring fence of Ashlands; you would soon become aware of other needs and requirements, and reproach me in the long run for neglecting and ignoring them. When you grew old and gray, Sybil, you would find imperfect consolation even in Greek tragedy. What do you say?"

He looked towards her, as he spoke, with an air of some deprecation; she was keeping even step by his side, with head erect, and pale resolute countenance.

"Tell me," she said, "how all these difficulties are to be met."

He tapped the letter he held impatiently with his delicate fingers. "Why do you presume to put me to the question thus? Has not Julian Karslake told you by word of mouth how he proposes to meet them? or, if not, he has told me in unmistakable language. This young man has a romantic attachment for you, Sybil; and where could you find a suitor better fitted to meet all the traditional requirements of your sex? From the moment you accept his addresses, he will help the boys to a career, and fulfil the duties of a son towards myself. He is rich and independent, and asks for nothing better than the opportunity of proving his devotion."

"And you would suffer him to prove it thus,—at my expense?" Mr. Dorrimore raised an appealing hand.

"Let us go back into the house and discuss this matter quietly, since I see you are inclined to be excited, Sybil. Not another word till the library door is shut behind us. How chilly this spring sunshine is!"

She thought so too; the glory of the earth, so apparent to her senses ten minutes ago, seemed departed, the buoyant energy of her mind collapsed. She followed her father passively into the room, and sat down in her accustomed place: her eye fell upon her Greek translation lying on the desk, and a vague feeling possessed her that that phase of her life had passed away forever. A new leaf had been turned in her history, and one that was unspeakably distasteful to her sight.

"Ay, what is this?" said Mr. Dorrimore, whose eye was *instinctively* caught by the finely-charactered sheets; "some original effort on the part of my ambitious little girl? But it can wait, Sybil, it can wait for another opportunity. What I want now is for you to tell me what answer I am to give to the letter under discussion."

He smiled as he spoke, archly he thought, somewhat spasmodically in fact.

"You forget that I do not know the contents of the letter: would you wish me to read it?"

"On the contrary, I will read it aloud to you myself: it deserves a second perusal. I defy any man to write on so delicate a subject with more exquisite propriety and nice feeling. Nay, child," responding to some involuntary gesture on the part of his daughter, "you need not fear there is a word in it that can wound your pride."

Sybil rose up and walked to the window, and stood looking steadily into the garden, while Mr. Dorrimore read the letter aloud in a finely modulated and deliberate tone. He was anxious to give it all the effect he could. When he had finished, he came and stood beside her, and laid his hand kindly on her shoulder. "Little one," he said, "could any man make a fairer or more generous offer? has he not defended every point from objection?"

"No," she returned, in a low, concentrated tone, for she was resolved on maintaining her self-control in her father's presence. "You and I see it from different points of view. To you it all appears as the disinterested offer of a man who proposes to relieve you from the charges you cannot meet; to me it is a covert bribe to induce me to forego my freedom of choice and action. Don't you perceive how ignoble that love must be, founded on sight and hearsay, and treated for as a matter of sale and barter?"

"I perceive that my little girl is very angry and therefore very unreasonable: he does not propose to marry you on the terms you mention. What he asks for is leave and opportunity to make your personal acquaintance and teach you to love him."

"I shall never love him," said the girl: "it is on my lips to say I hate him, only I feel it would be unreasonable to go so far." Mr. Dorrimore's sallow cheek took a paler tinge; he was deeply disappointed and strongly displeased.

"*At least, Sybil,*" he said in cold, acute tones, "I shall expect you to yield so far, say to our family interests, as to receive Mr. Karslake's visits and put the experiment to the test. Selfish as we may be all round, we shall at least never call upon you to offer up yourself as victim in the matter: rely upon it, no one proposes to coerce your precious freedom of choice and action."

The tone and sneer were so unusual as to bring the unaccustomed tears to her eyes. Did she deserve the taunt? Would she had some friend to whose equal tenderness and judgment she could appeal! for herself she felt as if she were groping in the dark. Presently her face brightened.

"Did you not tell me yesterday you expected Uncle Helstone on a visit? When he comes, would you mind asking him his opinion of Mr. Karslake's offer?"

"Upon my word, child, you are hard to understand! On one side, your delicacy is so acute as to be wounded by the guarded approach of a young man's love, and on the other, you propose to discuss the *pros* and *cons* of the matter with a rough-and-ready fellow like Gilbert Helstone! His opinion would not have a straw's weight with me."

Sybil was silent. She was not accustomed to argue with her father, but none the less she caressed the idea of the despised Helstone in her mind.

Presently Mr. Dorrimore added, "I think it is high time this childish nonsense was stopped in regard to him. 'Uncle Helstone' was well enough in your mother's lifetime, and when you were a baby in Queen Street nursery, but it is necessary you should now understand it was a mere *façon de parler.* Helstone is some distant kinsman of your mother's, and a well-meaning man in his way, but no uncle of yours, and without the shadow of a right to interfere, as he is so fond of doing, in my private affairs."

It was in Sybil's heart to reply "that they had always been the gainers by his interference," and it was rather an instinct of courtesy than affection which restrained the words.

Her loyalty to an absent friend, however, compelled her to say, though in a lowered tone,—

"We did not love him because he was our uncle, but because he was so good and kind."

"Pshaw, my dear! we will hope to extend your notions of masculine goodness and kindness. I think we shall scarcely settle to lessons this morning; I will look over your translation at my leisure. Will you go to the boys, or take a little walk by yourself to recover your usual tone? And, Sybil, one last word on a subject to which it will not be my way to be often referring: do nothing rashly. Don't sacrifice the interests of so many to a perverse, illogical prejudice."

And with this caution he dismissed her, opening the door for her departure, for perhaps the first time in her life.

Sybil stood for a few moments in the empty spacious hall, now flooded with sunshine, uncertain where to go or what to do. The gentle sway of the trees seen through the wide-open door, the scent of the daffodil meadows, and the gay carol of the birds seemed to invite her out of doors, and in her usual mood she would have summoned the children and led them off on some wild joyous ramble in which her own passionate delight in the sights and sounds of the uprousing season would have stimulated and exalted theirs.

But now she had no such inclination. On the contrary, after the first glance outwards, she suddenly dropped her bowed head upon her folded hands, and a few heavy unwilling tears fell through her fingers to the marble floor.

She had hardly cried since infancy, save with childish grief when her mother died, and she resented the weakness she was unable to overcome. Her sensations of trouble were intense if somewhat vague: she had spoken an absolute truth when she told Julian Karslake that she was a girl to whom the ideas of love and marriage were unwelcome, for she had much of the inherent asceticism of a highly-wrought intellectual organization which would need no ordinary influences to vivify and subdue. The unexpectedness and directness of her lover's advances both startled and displeased perceptions she had not known till then she possessed, but the feeling had been qualified by her perfect confidence in her own power to reject them finally and without appeal. But now complications had arisen which seemed to threaten the loss, not only of her happiness, but her dignity.

Her pride of independence was almost morbidly acute; she could scarcely have borne Julian Karslake's eager offers of assistance to the family at large, had she not known how promptly and absolutely she would repudiate them; and the knowledge that these or similar proposals had been previously made, and since renewed to her father, and were accepted by him as substantial arguments in favor of the young man's suit, was a humiliation so bitter as to force the tears from her eyes.

Under this pressure her indifference was fast quickening into active dislike. Not that at this time she allowed entrance to the idea of yielding either to the urgency of Karslake or to her father's ignoble pressure, but she recognized the fact that she was suddenly cut adrift from the joyous security and sufficing interests of the past, and that the future stretched before her under the hitherto unknown conditions of repugnance and apprehension.

CHAPTER V.

It is perhaps superfluous to say that Herbert Dorrimore had not much delicacy or strength of moral fibre. The inevitable shifts and evasions of poverty and debt, the pressure of paramount natural claims, which can neither be satisfied nor disallowed, are apt to attenuate that form of sensibility.

He had become aware that outside attention was being attracted to his domestic management; that people said it was time his two handsome spirited lads either went to school, as became their seeming position, or were put in the way of earning their own living if the paternal funds were *nil:* also that it was a crying shame that the eldest girl, who was so marvellously pretty, should be always kept at home to teach and mind the rest of the family.

Eighteen months ago he had been sanguine about the success of his great work, and had talked hopefully of sending the boys to Winchester; but here grievous disappointment had attended him. No publisher would undertake the risk on the magnificent terms Mr. Dorrimore thought his due. A subscription edition had been suggested, but he had not sufficient influence to make the plan a profitable one, and his pride, tenacious where his literary honor was concerned, disinclined him to the attempt. The matter had ended in the first *instalment of* the book being published by one of the trade magnates in sumptuous style, on the principle of divided expenses and profits.

The balance-sheet of the same had been recently received, and presented a dismal study; the details of expenditure were elaborately minute and doubtless absolutely correct, but the issue of the business was a heavy deficit on both sides of the account, and a polite but urgent representation that an immediate instalment of his personal share of the liabilities was expected.

It was about this time that Julian Karslake had communicated to Mr. Dorrimore his wish to be allowed to pay his addresses to Sybil, backing the request by a statement of his position and income, present and contingent, of so satisfactory a character as to commend the offer at once without hesitation to the harassed and impecunious scholar. The idea of his daughter's reluctance never occurred to his mind: he concluded that the advantages offered would commend themselves to her understanding as they did to his own, and he may at least be excused for the opinion that the young man was eminently calculated to attract and win a secluded girl, to whose vanity such a potent appeal was to be made.

To himself the whole affair was a god-send of unqualified good luck, relieving him at a stroke from difficulties which must otherwise overwhelm him, and generally smoothing the rugged road of life for all of them.

Sybil's contumacy had taken him painfully by surprise, but reflection had assured him that unreason was the inherent possession of every feminine nature, and that his influence, backed by the irresistible flatteries of a handsome lover, would soon bring the girl to another mind. Of that mind as a receptive medium he knew much, of its special idiosyncrasies scarcely anything at all.

A week had passed since their last interview, and the subject had not been alluded to again; also, as if by mutual consent, she had ceased to come to his study for her daily lessons.

No other of her pursuits had been intermitted; he knew she gave much of the time thus gained to teaching the boys, and continued to spend hours of the lengthening days out of doors with the children, as had always been the family custom. He felt that he must wait till some incident occurred.

Unfortunately for his impatient and irritable temper, the progress of affairs dragged considerably; more than a month elapsed before he received a letter from Karslake, telling him of the death of the relative he was visiting, and that consequently he should not be able to return to Roosden Magna till after the funeral and the settlement of certain affairs. He also told him that the deceased was the only relative he had on either side of the house, and that he was sole heir of an accumulated fund of personal property.

Mr. Dorrimore closed the letter with something of the feeling of having become unawares the possessor of a mine of unlimited resources.

Ten days afterwards Mr. Karslake returned, to resume, it was understood, his clerical duties in the parish till the vicar could provide himself with a substitute.

The morning after his arrival he called at Ashlands, and Hannah, knowing him to be a guest favored by her master, showed him at once into the library, where Mr. Dorrimore was seated *tête-à-tête* with his friend Gilbert Helstone.

It was a moment of mutual embarrassment. Mr. Dorrimore held at his entrance an open letter in his hand, which obviously he had been reading aloud to his companion, and which Karslake could not fail to recognize as his own. He had ridiculed his daughter's suggestion of consulting Helstone, and then, with the weakness of a nature so lacking in self-reliance as his own, had taken the first opportunity of pouring forth the whole story of the prodigious incident which was to bring prosperity to every member of the family, if only Sybil could be brought to hear reason. He hoped to fortify his own purpose by extracting from Helstone the admission that there was only one reasonable course of action to be pursued, and thought no way better calculated to produce this result than reading to him the letter in which the lover at once urged his suit and stated his means and intentions.

The appearance of Julian Karslake himself upon the scene was a *contre-temps* difficult to evade successfully.

Mr. Dorrimore rose hurriedly from his chair, pressing the letter with overt precipitation into the depths of his pocket, and introducing the two men to each other in that formal and labored fashion which comes of long seclusion and desuetude.

Karslake bowed with conventional courtesy, the other nodded abruptly, while keeping his keen gaze fixed on his face.

It was a face almost perfect in outline, with a singular clear pallor of complexion entirely removed from any hint of unhealthiness, and which rather served to exalt its typical beauty; but it was not a face to give up its secret to the first scrutiny of even a penetrating observer. The look which encountered Helstone's from the large-lidded luminous blue eyes was at once steady and serene; the firmly-moulded lips, shaded but not concealed by a golden moustache, indicated a suave but resolute self-control, while the short cleft chin and low broad forehead, with a slight suggestion of tension between the level brows, enhanced the power but contradicted the mildness of the physiognomy

Helstone, conscious of being baffled in his investigation, prolonged his gaze till the slightly raised color on the young man's face recalled him to a sense of his rudeness.

Julian Karslake turned with marked intention towards Mr. Dorrimore.

"I must apologize," he said, "for calling at so unreasonable an hour, but I believed I should have found you alone. I will call again at any time later in the day, when you are likely to be disengaged. I hope Miss Dorrimore and the children are well? Perhaps I might be fortunate enough to find some of them in the garden?"

He took up his hat, bowed, and turned to depart. His voice was singularly low, distinct, and musical, but none the less accent and manner, quiet and courteous as was the latter, grated on Helstone's perceptions. Before Mr. Dorrimore could speak, he answered, sharply,—

"You are mistaken; I am the intruder, and will leave you at once to transact the business you have on hand. The children are never at a loose end at this hour of the day. I will see, Dorrimore, you are not interrupted." And, with a slight, brusque nod towards Karslake, he strode out of the room.

When he reached the hall he paused and stood still, moved, as Sybil had been a few weeks earlier, by an entirely new sensation, and anxious both to understand and subdue the disturbance before going to the school-room. The sounds from the room behind him reached his ears indistinctly, and seemed to fire his blood; the querulous and apparently apologetic tones of Mr. Dorrimore had a quality of sharpness which almost rendered his words audible, but the low, modulated voice of his companion would have defied the keenest listener. For all that, Helstone put his fingers to his ears with a gesture of repugnance, and moved slowly towards the door through which the radiant spring-time smiled and invited him. He stood leaning against the lintel, with crossed arms and knitted brows, resolved on the rare effort of introspection.

What ailed him? what was required of him as a friend of the family but to rejoice at the good fortune that had befallen the daughter of the house, and offer his congratulations to her? He might be disgusted with the grasping meanness of the father, but the good faith and generosity of the lover were indisputable. And as for looks and manners, he said to himself with a sneer, why, he was a clerical Narcissus!

And then, somehow or other, he recalled to himself the image the glass was accustomed to show him,—the strong, square features, loose, untidy brown locks, and careless beard. He looked as it were into his own small eyes, deep set under shaggy brows, with their keen, uncompromising expression and lack of physical charm, and the cynical smile deepened on his lips. Could it be that, unknown to himself, an infant hope had lurked in the recesses of his unchallenged heart, as presumptuous and untenable as ever befooled a reasonable man? that he had thought to have been through life, say, the trusted friend and champion of Sybil Dorrimore, and that to see himself thrust aside as no longer needed caused this sense of bitter pain and injury?

He was roused by seeing a tiny figure flit across the garden-grass, with a flapping sun-hat shading the dainty face, and a flower-basket on her arm; the next moment he heard the shouts of the boys, and perceived that the family were starting for their daily noontide constitutional, for Sybil herself was bringing up the rear. He was obliged to go forward and meet them, for they had seen him standing idle in the sunshine, and were clamorous for him to join their walk.

"We are going to Datchley Wood," said Lucy, looking up smiling into his face, and slipping her morsel of a hand into his large palm, "and this basket is for cowslips. Perhaps you don't know it, but Hannah makes the most beautiful wine!"

"Then I shall certainly ask her when we get home to give me a taste of its quality. May I, Sybil?" he asked, falling into place by her side while the rest of the party rushed on in advance.

"May you! as if you were not quite sure that you could not please me or the dear old woman better than by so delicate a piece of flattery," she answered, turning to him with her radiant smile. "But is it really true you are going to stay with us more than a week?"

It was the first sufficient view he had had of her; he had reached the house late the night before, and his host had kept him in such close attendance on his own humors that he had only been able to pay a flying visit to the nursery before breakfast, and then Sybil was not there. She had given him just a brief greeting on his arrival, but had disappeared immediately, under the plea of looking after his sleeping accommodation. He had thought then she looked paler and graver than in the old times, but had put it down to her growing womanhood; now, as he gazed intently at her, as the sweet welcoming smile faded from her face, he saw there was trouble in it.

"Child," he said, in a low tone of infinite tenderness, "are the old ties to be broken between us? Am I not still the friend of the family? Your father at least has treated me as such, and told me the strange story there is to tell and instructed me to offer my congratulations. Am I to wish you joy?"

Sybil looked up with an eager, questioning expression.

"My father has told you?" and a smile rather compassionate than scornful touched her lips; "then I am free to speak."

They had entered the wood, and the child had run on to join the others in their search for flowers, so that the two were alone in the delicious privacy of the tender vernal shade, with a cloudless heaven above, and their feet deep in the thick undergrowth of ferns and flowers. A felled tree was lying near them.

"Let us sit down," said Sybil. "I have a great deal to say." She took off her broad hat and laid it on the grass beside her, and then, as if still oppressed, pushed back with her slender ungloved fingers the sombre masses of her hair.

The action showed the perfect contour of the rounded wrists, the graceful poise of the firm white throat, the exquisite profile of the face turned aside from him.

He watched her, but did not speak.

"You are not in a hurry?" she asked, at length; "not bound to return at any stated hour? I mean, my father will not be expecting you?"

"Mr. Dorrimore has a visitor who will make my goings and comings of no consequence. I will not beat about the bush, Sybil. Mr. Karslake is with him, and I have seen him."

She started a little, but her answer was not what he expected.

"I am very glad," she said, in the same low concentrated tone as before, one which he knew was strange to her. "I am very glad; you will be able to tell me how you like his appearance,—what conclusions you draw from it."

"I should be a bold man to draw conclusions from barely five minutes' speech and sight," was the answer, after a momentary pause of consideration. "At least he has good looks and good manners, and the reputation of good character as well,—ay, Sybil?"

"All that and more. He is very religious and devout, and seems to hold his riches—you know he is rich?—more as a trust for the benefit of those in need than as a means of self-indulgence. Perhaps that excuses a little the thing which I find so intolerable."

"And that is," said Helstone, with a short laugh, "the high-handed way in which he offers his purse to the impoverished family. The boys shall go to Winchester,—he will charge himself with their future career; the little girls, deprived of their natural guardian, shall have the best of *bonnes* or governesses; the father's debts, if any, and his wants, whatever they may be, shall all be met and satisfied in full. In short, he presents a blank cheque to Mr. Dorrimore, and bids him fill it in at his discretion: only there is a consideration!"

Sybil's face kindled, she drew a deep breath.

"You see it in the same light as I do; to me there is nothing but shame and humiliation in Mr. Karslake's overtures; but there may be circumstances which make even self-humiliation a duty."

Her companion was silent.

"The boys are so clever, and so sweet and good as well,"—looking towards them with yearning eyes,—"that to deny *them any possible* chance of distinguishing themselves seems cruel and unjust. Jack tells me he means to be the Lord Chancellor of the future, and dear Tom has a secret desire to go into the Church. Then the little ones are growing up and asking for more every day than it is in my power to give them. All this presses upon me with a painful sense of responsibility. But, granting that I could face the idea, you who know more of the world than I do, tell me, is it not an unheard-of thing for a man to charge himself with the support of a whole family? would not people cry shame upon us for suffering him to do so, and the time come when he would repent of his bargain and find the consideration a very poor equivalent?"

The girl rose as she spoke and buried her flushed face in her hands for a moment, then, slowly raising her head and straightening her slight, supple figure with a gesture of dignity mingled with deprecation, she added, with unconscious pathos,—

"You will not think it unwomanly for me to talk to you like this? You know I have no friends and have always loved and trusted you: tell me what I ought to do."

Helstone got up in his turn and walked a few paces from her. When he came back he was paler than usual, but he had taken his resolution.

"Let us sit down again and talk this matter over, as though we were brother and sister. You do right to trust me, for I have lived so much among women as to have become almost an old woman myself"—he stopped a moment.

"Yes," she said, looking at him affectionately, "I do not forget what you have sacrificed to your mother and sister; but what I am so afraid of is lest sacrifice should not pay. I am not of the devout nor yet of the heroic type. I want a great deal in life and—— if I made a terrible mistake it would help my misery very little to know I had done it from a good motive. Tell me your experience: it may help me."

"There is precious little to tell, and I see you have an exaggerated notion of that little. Just as I was called to the bar my father died in unsuspected debt and difficulty, and the maintenance of my mother and sister naturally fell upon me. I was engaged to be married at the time, and thought the break-up of my hopes and plans a terrible business, but there was *no help for it.* Thank God, the girl, who was a dear little thing, soon consoled herself with a better match, and so lifted off my shoulders the heaviest weight of all,—the fear that I had made a human creature permanently unhappy. I have lived long enough since then to see that it was all for the best. I doubt if we should have made a happy couple. That is all."

"Not quite all," she answered. "You tell me nothing of the protracted self-denials to clear off your father's debts, and—forgive me, I hardly dare to touch so sore a point—you hide the fact that there is that in the condition of your mother which has made of your daily life a dread and a martyrdom."

She leaned towards him as she spoke, her vivid face illuminated with the ardor of her enthusiasm: he had turned a little away from her, so that she could not see his face, but she took up the hand that was lying loosely on his knee, and touched it reverently with her lips.

"I have done you such scant justice all these years," she said, gravely, as if in explanation of the action.

Helstone sat quite still, enduring the contact that thrilled every nerve with an ecstasy of pain. After a moment he took her little hand, that trembled with emotion, into his cool and friendly grasp.

"You have redressed the balance, my dear," he said, quietly, "by the ardor of your recognition now. I thank you for it, for I won't deny it is sweet; but you must remember if my duty has been a little hard it was simply my duty, which none but the basest of men could have foregone. And now to go back to your own affairs. There is one way of making the rough places smooth,—I speak to the girl I have nursed as a baby,—give this young man what he wants, and the weight of obligation will be lost."

Sybil did not blush, but looked dreamily through the leafy shades of the wood.

"I have thought about love, and read much about it of course, and even"—with a little laugh—"ventured to write about it too. I have my theories and my ideals, like other girls, but"—she paused abruptly, and a wave of color swept over her cheek. Her keen vision had discovered the figure of Julian Karslake in the far distance making his way towards them.

She pointed him out to her companion, and almost unconsciously passed her arm through his.

"Do not leave me," she pleaded: "hear for me what he has to say. My father has sent him, or he knows our habits and has found us out. But it is an unwarrantable liberty to have taken: he must have known we were gone out with you."

Helstone smiled. "Let us admire his courage," he said. "Come, it behooves us to take a leaf out of his book and stand our ground: it will scarcely do for us to run away."

And yet as he glanced for a moment at her set pale face, and felt the trembling of the hand that rested on his arm, his own self-possession almost failed him, and he clinched his teeth within his closed lips.

A rare fern growing till then unheeded at his feet suddenly caught his downward glance; he stooped and picked it and showed it to Sybil with due botanical comment, anxious to see the tension of her mood relax; and as she fingered and examined it with real or assumed interest, he breathed more freely, and, standing a little apart, watched the progress of the young man towards them with a smile half cynical, half sympathetic.

It was unquestionably an awkward position for any man to fill, approaching a reluctant mistress under the eyes of her approved and confidential friend, but there was no apparent awkwardness to be perceived. Even to Helstone's unfriendly scrutiny Julian Karslake seemed endowed with every charm of person and grace of manner which could win a girl's free heart; and he acknowledged with a bitter reluctance that her yielding must be only a question of time. He also acknowledged, as Karslake drew near enough to raise his hat and address Sybil, that there was a rare absence of self-consciousness, a composed and dignified sweetness of personal manifestation, that could scarcely be compatible with anything but the finer traits of character.

Already, he said to himself, the girl felt the charm, for her face relaxed and she lowered a little the proud level glance.

"Hannah was right," she said, replying to his explanations, "in regard to our whereabouts, but she ought to have told you we had planned to spend the afternoon in a long ramble with our friend Mr. Helstone: it is very seldom we have the privilege."

Karslake smiled slightly in a grave deliberate way.

"That is an unmistakable dismissal, Miss Dorrimore, but I was prepared to find myself unwelcome. I was also charged with a message to Mr. Helstone, but I have scarcely the courage now to deliver it."

"You will hardly be able to persuade either of us that you feel any difficulty on the score of modesty," said Helstone, dryly, for there was something in Karslake's composure that tried his temper. "Speak out, man! I don't belong to the ceremonious school myself."

"Mr. Dorrimore wished me to remind you that his hour for luncheon is two o'clock, and that he objects to be kept waiting."

An angry flush rose to Sybil's cheek.

"I will call the children," she said, "and we will all return together. Shall we wish you good-morning, Mr. Karslake?"

Undoubtedly the young man had courage: he raised his eyes and met the girl's cold and angry glance, but it had not the effect of daunting his purpose for a moment.

"Pardon my persistence," he replied, "but I know your hours for meals are different, and it will not interfere with them to stay here a little longer. I am come on purpose to speak to you: will you not allow me the opportunity?"

Helstone glanced at him curiously and with a sense of increasing antagonism. His color was scarcely raised, his voice touched the same low modulated key as seemed habitual, but there was a quiet power under this mask of gentleness that made itself felt. He saw that Sybil would yield. Was it not inevitable that she should? At least, whatever the final issue, he would force her to listen to him,—as well sooner as later.

"You may as well stay, Sybil," he said, with that air of natural authority acquired by their life-long relations: "the children are not ready to go home, and I should be sorry for the family to lose their potential beverage. As for me, I have no option but to obey my host's commands."

He gave her a smiling farewell nod, as careless as if his heart had not been full of bitterness and pain; to Karslake he bowed stiffly enough; he was quite sure now that the feeling he had excited was one of absolute antipathy.

CHAPTER VI.

They were left standing by the felled tree: Karslake indicated it to Sybil.

"Will you not sit down?" he asked. "You look pale and fatigued."

It was on her lips to resent his remark and refuse his suggestion, for her whole spirit was in revolt against this forced interview; but it seemed to her finer sense unworthy to betray a petty irritation, therefore she walked slowly towards the place and sat down.

Her hat was still lying on the ground; she took it up and put it on: it was a relief to have a shade for her clouded and expressive face.

Then silence fell between them; she sat motionless, her head a little averted, her hands folded loosely in her lap, and the leafy branches above her chequering her girlish figure with dancing light and shade. She was aware that her companion, who was leaning against a tree near her, was watching her intently; but what he was about to say, or what answer she should return when he had spoken, she had no prevision or fixed purpose.

It was this absolute irresolution of will—this silence of conscience and conviction apt to be so prompt and decisive—which baffled her: she had a vague feeling of being outside her own destiny, waiting to see the die cast over which she had no control.

It seemed to her, as she sat waiting to hear Karslake speak, as if he would never break the irksome silence; but he did so at length.

"I see," he began, in the sweet measured tones that thrilled her nerves with a sense of keen irritation, "that you have scarcely patience to listen to me, and yet it is necessary that I should speak to you again. It is precisely six weeks to-day since I saw you last: through every hour of that time—whether by the bedside of the dying, or in the thick of secular affairs—I have thought of you, and every thought has been a kind of wordless prayer that your heart might turn towards me. Is there any hope of my prayer being answered?"

He paused and tried to look into her face that was turned steadily from him; paused a moment longer, waiting for her to speak; but, as she remained silent, he went on:—

"You must answer me: tell me at least what you wish me to do."

Then she lifted up her eyes full of repressed and passionate trouble, and looked at him steadily.

"What I wish you to do?" she repeated. "You cannot fail to see that no change has taken place in my mind since I saw you last. What does an honorable man do when he knows the woman he professes to love is distressed by his importunity? Do you need me to tell you that?"

"Leave her unmolested, you would say; but in that case his love must be either less than mine, or the obstacles greater than those which divide us. Why should you not love me, Sybil?"

As he spoke he came towards her and knelt in the grass at her feet, not so much as it seemed in the character of a passionate lover, as that the position enabled him to constrain her movements and to read the effect of his words in her face. From the same motive he suddenly seized the hands lying passively in her lap, and held them in a close and strenuous grasp.

"Why should you not love me, Sybil?" he repeated. "There is nothing in my body or mind to provoke instinctive aversion. I offer you the best that any man can offer,—not the mere accident of wealth, but the vigorous first-fruits of an honest passion. Perhaps it goes beyond that limit, for I love you with much of the heat, unreason, and determination to win what I want that I have scorned or condemned in other men. Without you life seems not worth having, and duty becomes a dead letter. What have you to oppose to the strength of such a feeling as this? only the insensibility of a recluse and studious girl. There is but one barrier I should recognize as insuperable"—

Up to this point the measure of coercion he had exercised, and the resolute persistence of his speech, had overborne her faculty of opposition, but the last words supplied the arrested power.

"Tell me what it is," she cried, passionately, and freeing her hands from his grasp, "and I will not fail to tell you it *exists.*"

For a moment there was a scintillation of anger in his eyes, and the slight contraction of the beautiful level brows deepened to a frown. He rose and stepped back to his former position.

"I could almost believe it does," he said, sternly, "or the lack of womanly kindness on your part would be inexplicable."

Sybil had risen too, and stood facing him, pale with agitation, but otherwise self-contained and erect, and demanding an explanation of his meaning by a proud questioning look.

"You do not understand? I meant that perhaps I was mistaken in thinking that the chief obstacle to my hopes arises from girlish reticence and overtaxed mental preoccupation. I do not know the secret of your life: you may love some other man."

The words dropped from his lips with painful reluctance, and in full expectation of provoking her to still deeper displeasure, but he was mistaken. A slight flush of color passed over the delicate cheek, and the fine curves of the lips relaxed and softened to a dreamy smile.

"I have loved many men from childhood upwards," she said, "with an ardor no living creature, I think, will ever excite in my mind: they have been heroes, saints, philosophers even: Pericles, Cæsar, Marcus Aurelius, in the old times; and in the present—I am not sure it would be wise to tell you the names of those who stir my enthusiasm most. You are quite right about my mental preoccupation: these are the things I care for. I have been a student all my life; I hope to be a writer in the future."

"And," he replied, "it would be the aim of my life to win you from all this impersonal devotion to a humbler love and a finer ambition."

"There," said Sybil, with a sudden brightening of her mobile face, "speaks the absolute antagonism between us. What the one holds as most precious the other underestimates and contemns. I doubt if we have any interests in common. I shall write under any conditions of life, as inevitably as the birds sing and the trees grow. Just now you asked me what I wished you to do: my answer is ready. Explain to my father that your unreasonable fancy for a girl you did not know will not stand the test of nearer acquaintance, and release me from the trouble and pain you have caused me. You are on the point of going away from here among your own people, where this shadowy impression in my behalf will vanish into thin air, and the old times, before we ever met or spoke, will come back again to both of us."

She smiled as she spoke with almost her usual radiance of expression; her voice had taken a gladder tone, her very gesture as she turned to move forward indicated a sense of freedom restored.

It was the keenest pain to him to observe these signs of her absolute indifference, but, except a little added pallor and firmer compression of the lips, he did not allow the feeling to appear, nor did he attempt to dispute her estimate of his feelings.

Sybil had turned to follow the children into the depths of the wood, and he walked quietly by her side.

"Before," he said, in a constrained tone, "I take my final dismissal from your lips, will you tell Mr. Dorrimore your decision? also, can one so generous and sympathetic as yourself feel no pain for the pain she inflicts?"

"But it is so difficult for me to believe that it is possible for me to give you pain; but if I do——" She stopped, and, raising her eyes, looked at him with an expression full of tenderness and regret. She would have bestowed the same look on any suffering creature, but it seemed to Karslake to suggest some degree of personal relenting.

"You deceive yourself," he exclaimed: "there is no real antagonism between us. Sybil, I shall yet teach you to love me!"

He tried to take her hand, but she snatched it away; her forbearance was exhausted.

"Hear me once and for all," she exclaimed, "and let this matter be ended between us. When you spoke to me before, did I not tell you that the offer of your love was thoroughly disagreeable to me, that all my nature ran in a different channel from your wishes? If to-day I have seemed less resolute, it was partly from respect to your feelings, which appear more deeply implicated than I could have believed possible, and partly from obedience to my father's command. But no consideration shall bind me to do the falsest act of a woman's life,—accept a love I cannot return."

"You forget," he answered, in a low, incisive tone, "that you are refusing a request I have never made. I have asked you for your love, but not for the disdainful acceptance of mine."

"In that case we are agreed," she said, haughtily, "and need not protract a painful interview. Nothing remains but for me to thank you for the offer of a privilege I am unable to appropriate, and to bid you a final farewell."

She quickened her steps as she spoke, with the motive of joining the children and protecting herself from further importunity by their presence. They had seen her approach, and were shouting to her to make haste and look at their spoils; but Karslake suddenly stepped before her so as to intercept her progress, at the same time making a peremptory movement of restraint towards one or two stragglers of the band who were inclined to run and meet them.

"You do not know what you are doing," he said; "you have no comprehension of the extent of your own ingratitude."

Sybil turned a little pale, a sickness of heart seized her, but she did not lose her courage.

"I know," she replied, firmly, "that you have gained my father's favor by liberal promises of help to all of us, and you may well judge how poor and harassed he is when he has been led to listen to them instead of resenting them. But I cannot look upon this as a claim upon my personal gratitude; to my mind it wears quite a different aspect, and does not touch at any point my notions of generosity. Shall I add that I think you forget your position in reproaching me in this way?"

"Did you think," he asked, "that the ingratitude with which I ventured to charge you had anything to do with benefits either offered or conferred? No man with any instinct of decency would claim anything from the woman he loved on the ground of obligations received. The fault I find in you is the absolute indifference with which you throw away a love such as mine, without a single effort to estimate or pity its reality and strength. Fortified by your coldness against suffering, my suffering is of no account to you. But, as I told you before, I am not soon daunted: I shall leave no effort untried to gain that without which all the world is loss to me. I believe I shall yet conquer your insensibility; sooner or later you shall love me, Sybil."

Involuntarily the girl shivered. There was a concentration of purpose in his low tones which seemed equal to the accomplishment of his will. Some shadow cast by future experiences seemed to chill and darken her spirit, and induced her to speak with a passionate asperity alien to the intrinsic nobleness of her nature.

"Have you the power of destroying my free will," she asked, "or am I bound, under penalty of moral condemnation, to accept your own estimate of the good you offer me? Do you think no man as much in earnest as yourself has ever failed before? I know—you have reminded me—you are well qualified to win a girl's heart, but I am different from other girls. I see you are beautiful, but what is your beauty to me if it does not touch me? I believe you are good and kind, and still my desire is to escape from you. Can I say more?"

She stopped and turned towards him in the energy of her expostulation, every point of face and figure irradiated by the tender spring sunshine, falling in broken lights through the foliage above their heads.

There was much of the virginal majesty and proud self-reliance of a Diana in the poise of the tall and supple figure; the perfect lines of her face, the vivid crimson of the sensitive lips, the passing glow of indignant feeling on the clear pale cheek, the angry sparkle of the eyes which met his in unflinching protest, stirred the hot blood in his veins and shook him with a paroxysm of mortal passion.

For a moment he hesitated whether to turn and flee from her in despair at her coldness, or to seize her in his arms and try and melt her heart against the fire of his own.

This was the transient impulse in one over whom impulse had lost its sway. What he did was prosaic enough.

He held out his hand to her with the ordinary action of leave-taking.

"Let us at least part friends," he said. "I have not the courage to withstand your hard words,—at least to-day. Good-by."

Their hands met. He scarcely touched the warm ungloved finger-tips, but there was something in his very abstinence that brought a sense of keen compunction to the girl's chivalrous soul.

"Forgive me!" she pleaded, attitude and expression changing to sudden softness. "I have been rude and harsh in trying to be plain, and your forbearance makes me doubly ashamed. I should be proud to call you my friend."

She held his hand in her own in a generous clasp, and he endured without returning the pressure,—endured to look into her tender eyes, full of sweet self-reproach, with no further betrayal of himself. And then when she had turned away he went deliberately towards the children, greeting them all by name, and saying something apt to the individuality of each. He even waited to examine and gauge the contents of their baskets, which they pressed upon his notice in the eagerness of their childish competition.

"Go," he said, after a few minutes: "your sister is waiting."

And he stood tranquilly watching their departure till the last childish figure had faded from his sight, the clear treble voices—all talking eagerly together—had fainted on the distant air. They left a solitude profound enough to sanction any demonstration of self-indulgence, and for a moment the young man felt a wild desire to throw himself prone on the grass where she had sat, and bury his face in the feathery blades caressed by her unconscious fingers.

He contented himself, however, with stooping down and picking up a bunch of wild flowers she had held and dropped; among them were the rare fern-leaves Gilbert Helstone had given her. These he threw away with an instinctive impression of repugnance and mistrust; the rest he shut up between the leaves of a little book he carried in his pocket.

Then he too turned and left the wood.

CHAPTER VII.

THE old manor-house of Ashlands stood about three miles from the sea-shore, and Gilbert Helstone, with all a Londoner's desire to drink in as much pure air as possible during his brief holiday, was in the habit of striding down to the beach and back again before breakfast.

On the third morning of his visit he had accomplished his constitutional at an earlier hour than usual, and, finding he had time to spare, he ascended the precipitous cliff which formed the eastern point of the long line of rocks stretching far beyond the range of vision, and threw himself on the turf. It was a morning in the middle of May, but the season was early with the fretful uncertainty of our English climate, and the temperature was as high as midsummer. The sky was a fleckless dome of pale blue, palpitating in the white light of the unclouded sunshine, and the sea shone with a metallic lustre in the unmitigated glare. A few fishing-boats, for the most part gone out to empty the lobster-pots of their night spoils, dotted the surface here and there, or the sails of a distant vessel struck suddenly into sight on the verge of the horizon.

On the beach below two tiny figures were stripping off their clothes preparatory to a plunge in the sea, for the coast was secluded enough to make it free to any bather.

At the height he was above them Helstone could not recognise the boys, but as their young shrill voices rose in the silent air he detected a familiar ring, and identified them as Jack and Tom Dorrimore. He was, however, in no mood to discover himself, nor was he anxious for their gleeful companionship back to the house, for there are times when the careless light-heartedness of children jars with intolerable discord on the adult mind, harassed with the cares and disappointments of life.

He was aware that the twins were accustomed to come down and bathe alone, but they generally went to a different part of the shore, considered safer and more remote from observation than this. The whole range of beach at Roosden Magna was of shingle, and regarded as dangerous and treacherous in the extreme for any bather who was unfamiliar with the features of the coast, and Helstone had even expostulated with Sybil on the risk she suffered the children to run.

But she had answered brightly that the danger did not exist for those who knew as they did almost every pebble, rock, and pool, every shelving slope and sudden pitch of coast, from infancy.

He threw himself down on the turf and watched their gambols with no feeling of uneasiness; the tide was ebbing fast and the sea superficially calm, though with an ominous *ground-swell* undetected by his unpractised eye.

He was reassured, too, by the sight of another bather at a considerable distance from the boys, who had rowed out from the shore into deep water, had sprung into the sea with the cool dexterity of a practised diver, and had been for some time swimming luxuriously in its warm pellucid depths.

Helstone felt inclined to envy him that power over the element which he himself had never acquired; and there was an obvious mastery and vigor in his movements which struck even the unprofessional observer.

"The man who cannot swim is maimed of another sense," he said to himself: "I suppose these lads can do a little in that way."

He approached the edge of the cliff to watch them; they were still playing "like troutlets in a pool," running races with each other, diving, dipping, and wading far out into the receding tide. Now and again he could only see their curly black heads bobbing up and down like corks in the water, and a feeling of considerable uneasiness possessed him. Still, they never failed to scramble back in safety to the shore, their merry laughter sounding far and wide in the clear air.

Helstone shouted to them it was time to go home to breakfast, but apparently his voice was not heard. They rushed back into the water as before, intent on securing a prize of magnificent mares'-tails sea-weed which was floating past them.

Jack, the most adventurous, had seized it in his grasp, as he thought, when the slippery object escaped him; he made another dash after it, lost his foothold on the treacherous slope, and before he could recover himself the ebbing tide had sucked him under and was carrying him out to sea beyond any chance of his power of recovery.

Tom, who had struggled back in safety to the shore, uttered a piercing shriek, running frantically back into the sea at the peril of his own life.

It was a terrible moment. Helstone's position was one of such absolute powerlessness as to bring with it almost the experience of madness. He could not annihilate the awful distance between himself and the drowning boy, though the first impulse of frenzy was to leap sheer from the cliff on which he stood; but, granting that he had failed to dash out his own life in so doing, of what avail would it have been?

He could *not swim*; he was as helpless to save life as the shrieking child below. Was he then to stand, with the sweat of mortal terror on his brow, and passively watch the destruction of that cherished life, and take back the news to Sybil? All this occurred to him with the instantaneousness of thought, and then a gleam of hope struck across his mind.

That stout swimmer he had seen before, and who was now leisurely putting on his clothes, must surely have noticed the boys at play, and might have seen the danger; or, if the curve of coast had hidden them from his sight, Tom's screams for help must surely reach his ears.

No; he could perceive from his movements that he was unaware of the tragedy being enacted before his eyes; the poor boy's cries, choked with sobs and abortive efforts at help, had not penetrated to the ledge of rock on which he was sitting, full in Helstone's sight. But his voice should reach him; and Helstone gathered up his strength into a mighty shout for help that, in its strenuous agony, might almost have roused the dead.

The other has heard the sound, and looks quickly up to see whence it proceeds; but, God of mercy, how deliberately he moves! Another minute, and it may be too late, if not too late already; does he not see the tiny figure tossing on the crest of the outgoing wave? He does; there is a moment's pause, a quick glance around as if to gather some comprehension of the facts, and then he rushes to the water's edge and flings himself into the sea.

To the man standing in speechless agony above him and watching his movements, the sea looks calm and his progress slow and unsatisfactory; but he cannot estimate the cruel force of the heavy ground-swell against the swimmer's limbs, nor the fact that the ebbing tide carries its victim still beyond his reach.

What he sees is that the boy is not yet saved, and he almost curses the inadequacy that mocks his hopes.

Again and again, yielding to a useless impulse, he shouts encouragement or invective, until at length the blessed moment of fruition comes,—the boy is in the grasp of his savior. Then Helstone prepared to rush down the cliff, eager to be at hand to receive the piteous burden, never doubting that his life is still in him.

Standing now on the sea-shore, he is better able to judge how severe a struggle it has been; the swimmer is still some distance from land, and he has evidently some difficulty in breasting the waves that beat him backward, with one arm encumbered with his helpless load.

They stand and watch him, man and boy on either side.

Poor Tom, with set white face, shivers naked on the beach, with his eyes strained towards his brother, and scarcely conscious of the tender pity with which Helstone has drawn him towards him. The other two are near enough now for speech and recognition.

"It is Julian Karslake," gasped Tom. "Oh, Jack!—look at Jack!" The boy's nerveless arm hung over Karslake's shoulder, his face pale as a lily rested upon the same, the salt ooze dripping from his hair over the closed eyes and parted, breathless lips. The limbs, of marble fairness, seemed to Helstone's shocked perceptions to have already the rigidity of death. He would have waded into the sea to take him into his arms, had not Karslake shouted to him to stand back.

"You do not know the coast: it is steep as a hill-side. I shall be all right in a minute."

A few minutes longer, and he had put the boy carefully into Helstone's arms.

"Keep his head raised," he said; "and Tom, my boy, run for my coat yonder."

Tom flew speechless and heedless of the stones that cut his naked feet.

"He is dead," said Helstone, in an awed tone. "Oh, God, that I had been on the spot, and had skill and strength to save him!"

"We cannot decide that he is dead: let us lose no time in useless regrets. Here! wrap him in this coat and carry him to the Harbor Inn, close at hand. We can try some simple remedies till medical aid is brought."

By this time the news of the accident had spread, and stragglers were gathering from every part. There was no difficulty in finding a messenger to the nearest doctor, and suggestions were poured in on all sides. Karslake's advice could not be improved upon, however, and Helstone followed it, making his way as swiftly as he could over the heavy shingles, with Jack's head pillowed on his arm and a crowd of fisherfolk, men, women, and boys, bringing up the rear.

Tom, pale and hushed, stayed of necessity behind to put on his clothes, looking from time to time at Karslake, who had volunteered to wait for him, and was standing a little way off wringing the water from his hair and garments.

A stifled sob reached his ears.

"My hands shake so I can't dress myself: would you mind helping a fellow a bit?"

Karslake came towards him. "I am a little shaken myself, Tom, but we shall manage between us. Come, you cut a much more respectable figure than I. Now you have your boots on (we will not wait to lace them), I think I must ask you to run for my other clothes under the cliff. Don't forget the shoes, and I will not keep you two minutes."

Tom was there and back in a flash, and in a few moments they were walking hand in hand over the beach towards the inn.

"I did not know it was you, Mr. Karslake, at first. Oh, what will poor Sybil say!"

"Nor did I know it was Jack Dorrimore, so that Sybil at least will have nothing to say to me, besides——" He stopped short, for he saw the boy had no doubt that his brother's life was saved.

As they approached the house, the crowd which was momently increasing gave way with a murmur of pity and approval.

"It was passon who went in after him: they do say he's the finest swimmer in all the country round. Ay, thick's the little lad's brother."

The drowned boy was lying on a couch, wrapped in a blanket, in the best parlor of the inn, as Karslake and Tom entered.

A bath with hot water stood near, from which it was evident he had just been lifted, without any effect on his condition being produced.

Gilbert Helstone was hanging over the head of the sofa with intense anxiety written on his face, and the motherly landlady was on her knees, chafing, with patient assiduity, the yet cold and rigid limbs. Tom gazed about him for a moment with distended eyes, and then, uttering a piercing cry, rushed forward, and, before he could be restrained, had flung himself on his brother's body.

"Oh, Jack," he sobbed, hugging him in his warm arms and pressing his now glowing face against the lips and cheek and brow that were the counterpart of his own, save in their still pallor, "why don't you open your eyes and speak to me? You are not drowned, you know! Julian Karslake has saved you. Why don't you do something for him?" he demanded almost fiercely of the pitying group who stood around: "it is cruel to let him lie here like this."

"My boy," said Helstone, tenderly, "we will do our best, and in order that we may do so you will get up and go away and wait patiently in another room till we can bring the good news to you. He cannot breathe while you are holding him so tight." Tom released his grasp and rose to his feet.

"I can do no harm by looking at him and watching," he pleaded: "let me stay."

At this moment there was heard the distinct sound of wheels, and a stir and movement in the little crowd outside the windows. The announcement that the "doctor be coming" flew from lip to lip. Tom caught the welcome sound, and his look of agony lightened. Dr. Bertram was an old friend, in whose power to save he had the most implicit confidence, and he flew out of the room to meet him.

The doctor was just stepping out of his high dog-cart. The boy rushed towards him to help and quicken his movements.

"Come!" he gasped; "it is Jack. He would have died if you had not come; now it will be all right."

"We will hope so, my boy; we will do our best. Let us see Jack at once." He went straight up to his patient, after a keen glance round the room at its several occupants and a friendly nod to Karslake.

He stood for a moment by the couch, shocked, in spite of his professional training, at the aspect of the pathetic little figure stretched upon it, whose vitality of yesterday had been so abundant and joyous a possession.

He felt his pulse and tested his temperature without suffering his face to betray to those who were watching him anxiously the impression produced.

"How long was he in the water?" he asked, abruptly.

"Not a quarter of an hour, I should think; but we had no means of measuring the time." It was Helstone that answered.

"It was longer than that," said Karslake, in a low tone:

"I did not notice his danger at first: there was a heavy sea on, and the tide carried him out."

Dr. Bertram nodded. Then he sat down by the side of the boy and raised his head carefully on his arm, compressing the delicate nostrils, and wiping out his mouth and throat with assiduous tenderness.

"Let us have fresh hot water," he said, cheerily, "and hot bottles to succeed: we have perhaps some hours' work before us, and I must have the room cleared except of our good hostess and the one of you two gentlemen who can best trust his own nerve and patience. Please God, we shall yet bring him to."

The two men looked at each other, both recognizing the sacrifice demanded.

Then Karslake rose.

"Mr. Helstone is an old friend of the family, against whom my claims to make myself useful count for nothing."

Bertram looked disappointed. "We have worked together before, Julian, at such tasks as these; however, settle it between you. And you may as well take the earliest opportunity of changing your wet clothes and getting a cup of hot coffee. Then, if you want to be otherwise useful, go up to Sybil Dorrimore and break the news gently to her."

CHAPTER VIII.

It was afternoon on the same day when Gilbert Helstone entered the library at Ashlands. He had seen as he passed the window that Mr. Dorrimore was not there, and that Sybil was standing at her father's writing-table, so intent upon a strip of paper she held in her hand that she had neither heard his footsteps nor perceived his approach. Also, there was something in her air and attitude that told him she was still ignorant of the events of the morning. He went in quietly and closed the door behind him.

Sybil looked quickly up: there was a contraction of pain and displeasure on her face that passed away immediately beneath the sudden anxiety his aspect excited.

"What is the matter? has anything happened? Have not Jack and Tom been with you?"

Helstone hesitated. "They are all right now," he said, hurriedly, as he watched every trace of color receding from the vivid face before him, and the eyes dilating with an instinct of almost maternal apprehension. "You may well bear to hear of their danger when I tell you it is over. Have you seen no one this morning?"

"No one. You are not keeping anything back from me in mistaken kindness? Am I wanted? Is there anything to be done? I can be quiet in an emergency."

"My dear, thank God the emergency is past. In one word, Jack has had a severe ducking, but a good night's rest will set him right again, and he will be able to walk home to-morrow to tell his own story. Tom simply stays beside him because it seems to be a law of nature they should not be parted."

"And that is all,—all the truth? no reservations,—no after-claps of pain? May I go to him?"

"Certainly you may if you will, only I hope you will first give me some dinner, of which I stand sorely in need. Come, child, drop your mistrust of my statements, and sit down like a sensible girl, and I will tell you the whole story point by point. But were you not uneasy at our non-appearance at breakfast?"

"Not in the least; I knew they were gone down to bathe and would meet you on the beach, and I concluded that you were giving them a breakfast at the Harbor Inn, as you have sometimes done before. But Jack,—tell me about Jack! And yet I hardly need to be told. He was bathing,—he went out beyond his depth. And I owe his sweet life to you. I do owe it?—he is saved?" she added, passionately.

Helstone's swarthy cheek flushed. He felt as if he would almost have given his right hand to be able to answer in the affirmative and establish such a claim upon the ardent gratitude of the tender, pain-stricken girl who was hanging on his lips. "He is saved," he said, in a dry, measured voice, "but not by me. You owe your debt to Julian Karslake."

Sybil recoiled as if a blow had struck her, and, though no exclamation had escaped her self-control before, she now uttered a low sound almost like a moan of pain.

Helstone watched her with acutest interest.

She stood for a few moments a little turned away from him, evidently striving to rally her forces; then, sitting down in the chair he had before offered her, she said, in a quiet constrained voice, "Please tell me all about it."

When he had done she lifted up her pale set face, but there were no tears in her eyes.

"But he ran no risk in saving him; he has the reputation of a champion swimmer; on such a morning as this the sea would be calm. It was an act of simple humanity that cost him nothing."

Helstone was silent.

"Was it not so?" she asked, with a vibration of pain in her voice that touched him to the quick.

"Not quite so easy as all that; but I am a poor critic of aquatic feats; but it seems, according to Dr. Bertram, he has a speciality for saving life from drowning, and we are all fond of exhibiting our prowess, whatever form it may take."

And then, suddenly changing his tone, and speaking with a bitterness which he no longer tried to repress, he added,—

"You will have to give in, child; you will never be able to withstand these accumulated inducements."

Her answer startled him, it was so different from what he had expected. "Yes," she said, drearily, "I am being driven by circumstances beyond my power of self-direction: each new incident seems to bind me hand and foot. Look here!"

She took up the same slip of paper he had seen in her hand on entering the room and showed it to him. It was a cheque to Mr. Dorrimore's order, drawn by Julian Karslake on the local bank for eight hundred and fifty pounds.

Helstone took it from her hand, examined it curiously, and put it down without comment; but one glance at Sybil's shame-dyed cheeks was such an appeal to his sympathy that he said,—

"You see, men view pecuniary transactions so differently. I should find it hard to accept five pounds from my best friend if I were starving; Julian Karslake would tell us that was unchristian pride, and that he would take alms if he needed them. Your father has no sensibility on this point: he has long lived out of the world, and he thinks the world ought still to find him means to do so. He considers himself defrauded of his dues as a writer, and accepts a bonus like this as a providential righting of the scale."

"But consider," she said, almost with a shudder, "how my father must have confided all the secrets of our position to him, have shown him his loss of spirit and dignity, before he would be able to make him fully understand that he had no pride nor manhood left to be insulted! Mr. Karslake must know this is a free gift; I mean, there cannot be the smallest pretence of future payment, nor do I feel sure that this is all. What I do know is that we are at this moment pensioners upon his bounty——"

"Not quite so bad as that, Sybil: a man's loan to a friend is not accepted as an obligation by every member of the family, and, after all, there is no doubt that Mr. Dorrimore calls this a loan. It is at least in our power to make Karslake understand that you and the children are so far provided for as to be independent of his good offices, and that what transactions take place between him and your father are simply their own affair. Will you leave these matters in my hands, child?"

Sybil looked up with an ironical smile.

"And you will undertake to tell him, too, that I equally refuse to acknowledge any claim upon my gratitude for his saving Jack's life,—that, precious as my little Lord Chancellor is to me, I have bought him back too dearly if thanks and deep obligation to him are to be the price? No, Mr. Helstone, no; you cannot help me. The idea of discussing these matters of pounds, shillings, and pence with Mr. Karslake makes me sick at heart. His beautiful, high-bred face would express nothing but cold surprise. Matters must rest as they are for time and chance to settle, and what that settlement will be it is not very difficult to guess."

Her voice sank to a tone of utter dejection.

"Even now," she continued, as Helstone remained silent, "I am fully aware our affairs are falling from bad to worse. My poor father, discouraged by ill success, does not write with the talent and spirit of old. We all want the sunshine of a little favor to develop and sustain our faculties. The last two seasons have been bad, and that makes all the difference between paying our narrow way with great difficulty and much self-denial, and not being able to pay it at all. Bills, not of extravagance but of barest necessity, haunt my dreams like a nightmare; it is no good to take them to my father, for he has no money to give me. If the children are sick, I tremble with apprehension quite apart from love or fear, lest I should be constrained to call in Dr. Bertram, whose last account has remained for years unpaid. What little I can do to reduce expenses seems so poor and useless as almost to paralyze my efforts——"

"Stop!" he cried, deeply pained: "can this have been the case, and you have not claimed my right to help you? Sybil, I thought you had more faith in me."

"I have perfect faith in you," she answered, with a sweet gravity, "but I have learned only very lately the details of your domestic life, and I doubted your right to help us. If you had been alone in the world, I almost think I should have told you all this before, and asked you for what I wanted; and if I tell you now it is that you may understand the resistless pressure upon me. The case stands thus: we must continue to struggle on, sinking year by year into deeper poverty,—my brothers denied their natural rights,—or I must go to Julian Karslake and tell him the truth."

"And what is the truth?" demanded Helstone, almost harshly.

"That I showed a total misconception of my true position when I dared to reject his advances with so much decision and pride of independence; that I am so hampered by responsibilities, sacred responsibilities, that I cannot escape; that if he is still willing to help us"—her voice fell—"I will acknowledge his charity in any way he chooses to dictate."

"If the dictation assume the form of a brief engagement and speedy marriage?"

Sybil looked at him with pained surprise, but to protest or complain was contrary to her nature.

"You make me feel," she said, "how unnaturally I am situated in having no womanly guidance. It is scarcely seemly to discuss such closely personal matters, even with a kinsman and life-long friend like you. But, as I have gone thus far, I will go on to the bitter end, and answer your question. Don't feel too much anger or disgust, for all this is the outcome of very hard and very painful thinking. If Mr. Karslake will accept my submission after all I have said to him, I will leave *every* future arrangement in his hands."

"And will you tell him that you love him, child? He will want that."

"No," she cried, passionately, "I will not tell him that, but I will tell him that I will order my life and conduct in obedience to his will. And if it be possible to coerce one's love, I will love him yet with all my heart and all my strength."

Her eyes flashed, and her pale cheek took that slight transient flush that strong emotion calls up in high-strung temperaments such as hers.

Helstone gazed upon her with a strong yearning pain, and then, mistrusting his own forbearance, got up and began to pace the room.

"One more unworthy question from my lips, Sybil, and I have done; and think of me as the life-long friend in answering it. It seems so strange that a man like Julian Karslake should fail to please you, that I am half inclined to believe that you have seen some one else that has taken your girl's imagination captive. Is it so? Does the man live whom you would rather marry?"

He turned suddenly round and faced her, his own deep-set eyes and cheek aglow, but there was no answering gleam in hers, and he scarcely cared to wait for the quiet disclaimer that fell from her lips.

The sudden entrance of Mr. Dorrimore was a welcome relief to each.

"Ay?" he said, looking suspiciously round, "a cabinet council of two? I look upon this room as sacred, Sybil: strange that I should have to tell you so at this date. Have you been meddling with my papers? surely I did not leave them open like this?"

He went eagerly to his writing-table, shuffling the papers right and left, and covertly slipping the cheque out of sight.

"I came in as usual after dinner to see if you wanted me," began Sybil, but Helstone interrupted her by rising to leave the room.

"I am going to the nursery, Sybil, to try and induce Hannah to find me something to eat. She will not prove hard-hearted, I trust, though I ask for it in uncanonical hours."

He nodded to his host and departed.

Mr. Dorrimore's pale fastidious face contracted into a frown.

"Is it *that* man who influences you against your true interests? Sybil, I have something very serious to say to you."

He sat down in his padded chair, clasping each arm with his thin flexible fingers as if to impart resolution to his purpose, and looked his daughter steadily in the face.

"I am prepared to listen," she said, in a low voice, "but before doing so I am bound to tell you I have seen Mr. Karslake's cheque. I could not help doing so: it lay open on the table."

A slight flush passed over Mr. Dorrimore's cheek. Sybil observed it, and it drew her heart towards him and strengthened her purpose. She was going to add another item to her confession, when her father interrupted her.

"It is of little consequence," he said, coldly: "it would have been part of the business I have in view to tell you of it. That cheque represents a loan without which open shame and disgrace must come upon us. Which shame, think you, is the worst?—to accept such a loan from a man who will not miss it, or to leave our village tradesmen's bills unpaid till their forbearance is exhausted and they drive us to extremities and out of Ashlands?"

Sybil remained silent.

"Out of Ashlands!" repeated Mr. Dorrimore, cynically: "that will follow. The same post which brought this timely aid from Julian Karslake brought also a letter from the new owner of the place,—my old friend's nephew. He writes to say his uncle was rich and eccentric, but he is poor and practical, and the only terms on which he will accept me as a tenant are that I pay a sufficient rent for house and land. Now, the fair marketable value of Ashlands would absorb every shilling I could lay my hands on."

He paused again and looked at the pale girl opposite him with an expression of bitterness almost vindictive in its intensity.

"I have not yet finished the list of our woes: I am growing old and weak, and the brain no longer answers the demands made upon it. My girl can criticise her father. For years my pen has helped to feed my brood, but it will do so no more. I must stand aside for younger men and lesser gifts. You will perhaps answer that I have spent as little on my children as it was possible to do, and nothing at all on their education.

It is not true. I have emptied my mind into yours so far as it could hold the gift, and if in turn you communicated what I gave you, I am still the fountain-head."

"Father," cried Sybil, rising in distress and going to his side, "have I ever dared to reproach you? have I ever, even in thought, presumed to judge your conduct? What have I done, that you are so angry with me?"

She had laid her hand tentatively on his arm, but he pushed it away.

"What have you done?" he repeated, with a sneer: "vindicated your woman's right of free will, and rejected the man who alone could stop our fall to ruin. As you examined the cheque just now in defiance of all the laws of honor, perhaps you also read the note in which it was enclosed? No? It is no matter: you shall know the contents of the one as of the other. Mr. Karslake followed you on Tuesday to Datchley Wood: he did so at my suggestion, or at least with my sanction. What reception did you give him?"

She was silent: such a change of feeling had passed over her since then that she was inclined to wonder at the vehemence and determination she had shown.

"Give me an answer, Sybil; I am disposed to hear your version of the tale."

"If," she replied, coldly, "Mr. Karslake has laid his complaint before you, there is nothing for me to tell. Doubtless he speaks the truth."

Mr. Dorrimore pushed back his chair so as to increase the distance between them: he was apt to express his displeasure by such puerile manifestations.

"You are insolent!" he said, in a tone new to her. "Is it on the strength of your youth and beauty, or because you are so learned and so clever? So far as that goes, Julian Karslake would like you better a little less exalted; and for the rest——"

He broke off suddenly, as if his measure of self-restraint, poor as it was, had given way, and went on more vehemently:

"Placed as we are, I might have been forgiven if I had urged you to accept any decent offer of marriage that would have helped us out of our difficulties. But what can any woman desire that this young man does not possess? What inexplicable blindness and insensibility is it that leads you to drive him away almost with insult and contumely? I am not selling you, as we are told our high-born mothers sell their daughters, to old age, vice, or infirmity, but to——"

But here Sybil interrupted him in her turn.

"Spare me," she cried, passionately, "spare me the reiteration of Julian Karslake's perfections: I admit them all! I *am* blind and insensible, and am prepared to own I treated him with insufferable arrogance, but——" with a sudden fall of her high spirit and a burst of reluctant tears, "my excuse is simply this: I do not love him."

"You talk like a heroine of penny romance," said her father, contemptuously. "Matrimony is a matter of mutual adaptability and respect; hot passion soon grows cold. If your personal fancy is for the *rôle* of a Juliet, I should advise you to thwart it: I don't think it would add much to your charms in Mr. Karslake's eyes. But we are talking beside the point: he has withdrawn his—persecution, shall we call it?"

Sybil wiped away her tears. "And all his liberal offers of help?"

"That, girl, is my affair," returned Mr. Dorrimore, angrily. "So much have I told you, that, if the ruin that impends is averted, you may be quite sure I have had outside aid. Whence it comes is no longer business of yours."

There was a brief silence. Presently she asked,—

"Is he going away?" and Mr. Dorrimore repeated, dryly,—

"He *is* going away, so soon as our vicar can provide a substitute. You would not have the church orphaned even for your sake?"

Sybil walked to the window and looked out. Her heart was full almost to bursting, but there could be no outpouring before this cynical father. The remembrance of her mother—the tall, fair, gracious presence of her happy childhood—glanced across her mind, evoking a passion of regret and yearning that almost amounted to agony. As she stood with her wistful gaze fixed on the outer landscape, she perceived that the wind had risen: there was a delicious murmur in the trees and a breath of salt air from the distant sea. She could scent the fine aroma and feel its refreshing breath upon her aching brow through the half-open lattice. It brought back suddenly to her mind the accident of the morning and her renewed obligation to Karslake, of which her father was still ignorant. Was she bound to tell him? Yes, by every instinct of honor, yes.

She told him in as few words as possible that the boys had gone down to bathe; that Jack had lost his footing and might have been drowned, if Mr. Karslake had not been on the spot and saved him. Her own face was pale with intensity of feeling, as she spoke of the terrible possibility.

"Little fool!" apostrophized the father; "we will put a stop to those games for the future. Jack is thirteen, and shall begin to earn his living. I have had an offer from a respectable chemist at Dorchester, and shall accept it; he has seen the boy and taken a prodigious fancy to him. I am a poor man, and must accept my position."

Sybil's lips parted in voiceless appeal. Jack—her little Lord Chancellor, the ardent, bright, imaginative student—relegated to a chemist's shop in Dorchester,—to a weary drudgery that would eat into his soul and, worse than all, divided from his other self, his twin existence! If the balance of her purpose had hung in equal poise before, her ardent sisterly affection supplied the determining weight. She looked at her father, but his unusual energy seemed to have collapsed; he was bending over a newspaper he had taken from a table. As she watched him, he threw it from him with an expression of impatience.

"My sight fails me; life on the terms I hold it is scarcely worth living."

His daughter went up to him and kissed his forehead; there was a deliberation in the action that made him suspect a hidden significance.

"You will have occasion to answer Mr. Karslake's letter," she said, in her low vibrating tones: "tell him that I want to see him to thank him personally for what he did for Jack."

Mr. Dorrimore had no fine intuitions. He caught her hand to detain her, for she was about to leave the room.

"You mean that you will smooth my path to possible blindness, Sybil?"

Her heart swelled, her eyes dilated, and a painful glow suffused her face and neck.

"Simply: I will make Mr. Karslake understand that I will be his wife if he still wishes to marry me."

CHAPTER IX.

MANY admirable and more false things have been said from age to age of the relation of the sexes,—that the one is meant by nature as the complement of the other, in default of which the existence of each remains maimed and incomplete. But assuredly as there are men, not spiritual ascetics only, with whom devotion to a cause, be it one of principle or passion, fills every interstice of their nature to the exclusion of those inherent yearnings, so are there women in plenty with whom to stand alone seems the necessary attitude for the full development of their powers.

They are not quick to love: not that their nature is unloving, but that they demand more than the individual can give; not that the sweet instinct of maternity is dormant within their bosom, but that they would not limit it to the brood that might cluster around their own knees. Such have felt they could grow better and freer with more room to grow in than is possible to any woman who has bound up her life with that of another and is limited and restrained by the pressure of baby fingers.

Vows make duties which otherwise one is at liberty to ignore and pass by.

From this class have sprung some of our finest intellects and most honored philanthropists. And to this class young Sybil Dorrimore conceived herself to belong; not perhaps with perfect justice, for as yet the passionate capabilities of her own nature were both latent and unsuspected. Her instinctive recoil from Julian Karslake arose more from the abruptness and determination of his advance, and the unsuspected favor given by others to his suit, than from any reasoned antipathy. At the same time it was no petty conflict she had passed through, nor was it any perfect victory she had gained. Circumstances had driven her to the edge of the circle she would fain have avoided, but she said to herself there was small chance that she should ever be induced to enter in and sit down at the central point of warmth and contact.

Three days had passed since Jack's accident, but Julian Karslake had not obeyed the summons contained in Mr. Dorrimore's note of acknowledgment.

"I shall have humbled myself in vain!" thought the girl, and, though her cheek burned with shame at the idea, her heart leaped with a sense of recovered freedom.

During that short period she endured a humiliation so intense that it was in itself calculated to harden her heart against the kindness that caused it. So many outstanding bills had been paid that the neighborhood woke up to the conclusion "that Mr. Dorrimore must have come into a fortune." Hannah for the most part disbursed these moneys, and every report she brought back to her young mistress of the equal surprise and satisfaction of the recipient was a separate sting and wound to Sybil's pride of independence.

Then again Tom delighted, now that all danger was over, to have such danger to describe, and, feeling himself to hold a superior position as witness of the scene, was never tired of going over the details of Jack's accident and bearing his hearty boyish testimony to Karslake's pluck and good nature.

Next to the disparagement of those we love, there are few things more trying to poor human nature than the exaltation of those we dislike.

As Sybil looked at her two brothers lounging in the sunny window-seat and stimulating each other in these reminiscences with a perpetual "Don't you remember, Tom?" and an "Ah, Jack, you couldn't know—of course," a feeling of irritability, quite new to her experience, ruffled her temper and gave a certain sharpness to her voice.

"My dear boys, do try and forget it all, and give your minds to your lessons, as you used to do before Jack was half drowned and wholly saved!"

"Why, Sybil," said Tom, reproachfully, "I thought you liked a noble action?"

"My darling," she answered, with prompt compunction, stooping down and kissing them both, "so I do. But a noble action is something that costs us hard, and it didn't hurt Mr. Karslake much to jump into the sea and fish Jack out."

Another almost intolerable vexation was her father's petulant anxiety at his non-appearance.

"Has he not called? have you not seen him, Sybil?" he would ask again and again in the course of the same day. "Surely he must have received my letter!" he would remark, and then he would speculate on the chances of miscarriage, and even propose to write again, had not his daughter's passionate protests sufficed to induce him to postpone his purpose.

Gilbert Helstone had returned to town, but a circumstance had occurred on the day of his departure of which the family at Ashlands naturally knew nothing.

The nearest railway-station was five miles from Roosden Magna, and the way to it lay direct through the village itself. As he passed in his hired fly along the principal thoroughfare, he saw Julian Karslake in the little garden belonging to the house where he lodged, evidently intent on some work among the flowers.

A sudden impulse seized Helstone to stop and speak to him; and, having looked at his watch and found he had ten minutes to spare, he called to the driver to stop, jumped out, and approached Karslake with outstretched hand and a cheery "good-morning," not suffering himself to be daunted by the fact that though the other had turned on hearing wheels and recognized him, he showed no inclination to come forward and speak.

"I have ten minutes to spare," continued Helstone, with rather forced heartiness; "better here in this charming old village than at the station. Are you given to growing flowers?—What a kindly dispensation of Providence it is that country curates can find interest in these rural pursuits!"

"I thought you grew flowers at the Temple? At any rate, I am so addicted to the pursuit, and so far an expert in it, that I sometimes doubt if I have not missed my vocation. Are you a connoisseur? examine these pansies."

As before, there was something in the suave and unruffled composure of his companion that chafed Helstone's temper and made him say, more from the desire to test Karslake's equanimity than from preconceived intention,—

"Excuse my turning the conversation abruptly. I just want to say two words to you: I am not only an old friend but a relative of the Dorrimore household, and have nursed Sybil as a baby. I know the girl's heart and character better than she knows them herself, and I want to warn you. She is capable of any sacrifice in the interest of her family, and of a life-long repentance afterwards."

Karslake was silent for a moment. "Is he honest?" was the question he was debating in his mind, and then he turned his clear, direct gaze upon Helstone's face, without a shade of embarrassment or excitement in his aspect.

"Well, on the strength of your intimate connection with Miss Dorrimore, I must perforce excuse an interference that would otherwise appear to me unwarrantable. Are the two words spoken, or is that but one of them?"

"Curse his insolence!" muttered Gilbert to himself; but aloud he answered, "I was afraid you would resent my speaking, but her happiness is of more account to me than a mere breach of conventional courtesy. If I should find it at any time wrecked in your hands, I shall not need permission to make my protest or even to come to her relief. What I say I mean: I have given you fair warning."

He turned and went quickly out of the little garden-gate, without giving the other an opportunity of reply, but as he jumped into the fly he looked curiously back to notice what might have been the effect of his words. To all appearance Karslake was bending over his flower-beds with as complete an interest as before the interruption.

"A cool hand!" he said bitterly to himself; "but the mischief is I leave him here to win."

But, for all that, Julian Karslake had not yet gone up to Ashlands to receive Sybil's proffered thanks.

CHAPTER X.

MR. DORRIMORE'S scholarly repose was disturbed: as day succeeded day in unbroken monotony, he began to realise with increasing exasperation that he was to be disappointed after all. Deliverance from debt, and peace of mind as regarded the future, had been offered to him on the very easiest terms, and he was to be flung back again into the slough of impotent anxiety, owing to the contumacy of his daughter. What could have been the character of her refusal, when so determined a suitor was not to be won back by the extended olive-branch? Then came the rumor that the vicar had found another curate, and that Mr. Karslake's departure was imminent. Surely he would not leave the neighborhood without coming to bid them good-by?

More than once her father had summoned Sybil to his presence under some shallow pretext, and then taken the opportunity to resume his cross-examination respecting the interview in Datchley Wood, as well as his acrid reproaches of her perversity and blindness.

To the high-spirited sensitive girl it was a moral torture hard to be endured, and all the harder that her life-long reverence for her father, and her noble tolerance of his infirmities, prevented any adequate expression of her feelings.

But the repressed passion naturally served to stimulate her irritation against the man who brought this humiliation upon her.

Things indeed went very hardly with the family at this time. Hitherto, so long as they left their father undisturbed they had been allowed to follow their own free will. Sybil had ruled without interference from, or reference to, his authority. But now Mr. Dorrimore, unable to settle to his books, took to wandering in and out of nursery and schoolroom, and to finding fault with every detail that came under his notice.

The boys were blamed, and that harshly, for idleness and uselessness, when in point of fact no occupation was open to them beyond their studies and games; the inevitable noise and ready laughter of buoyant spirits and sound health were rebuked and ridiculed as indications of stupidity and childishness. The father who had never spent half a dozen hours in his life on the training of his children now put them through a rigorous examination, and was unutterably disgusted to find that their mathematical and classical attainments were greatly below their sister's at the same age. He forgot that her education had been systematic, and her intelligence exceptionally keen, and that all that the boys had acquired—which was fairly creditable—had been derived from her in an uncertain and scrambling fashion.

"Are they dunces or fools?" he demanded, angrily eying her with that bitter irritation which the present state of affairs had induced. "I supposed you had done better for them than this."

"I have done my best," said Sybil, bravely, and stretching out a hand to each of the shame-faced lads with a burning sense of wrong and injustice, "and they are equal now to the third form either at Eton or Rugby. Give them a fair chance and they will soon show you what they are able to do."

"And whence," he asked, with a sneer, "do you get your knowledge of third-form requirements at either of the schools you mention? Is it derived from Gilbert Helstone, who scarcely knows dog-Latin enough to make his law-books intelligible? For the rest, I have no power to give them a fair chance; such was offered them, but you rejected it. Jack will have Latin enough to spell out the labels on Mr. Freeman's drawers and bottles. Can the other children read and write?"

He wheeled his chair round suddenly so as to face the three little figures crowded together in the ample window-seat, and who were watching his unusual proceedings with mixed wonder, fear, and dislike.

Bertie, who was ten, lifted up a pair of clear brown eyes and said, "I can read and write too. I can say the Lord's prayer in Greek and Latin. Sybil is the cleverest girl in the world; but I want a pair of new boots very badly, and Hannah says my knickerbockers can't be mended any more. Lucy and Clare want some too,—boots, I mean."

The sweet bold face of the boy touched a chord in the father's heart, a chord that could scarcely but vibrate again, as his eyes fell on the upraised countenances of his lovely little daughters, who were both gazing at him with the solemn round-eyed astonishment of childhood.

"I can't help Jack and Tom to the fourth form at Eton," he said, dryly, "but I can find you and your sisters some new boots. Here are five sovereigns, which the cleverest girl in the world may spend as she sees fit."

He rose as he spoke, took out the money from his purse and laid it on the table; the children gathered round it and began to handle the gold coins as a natural curiosity.

"Will that buy Tom and me a new suit too?" asked Jack. "It looks a lot of money—Why, Syb, what's the matter?"

The girl's face was crimson; there were tears of shame and anger in her eyes, and her heart beat passionately.

"Don't touch the money, Jack!" she said, in a whisper. "No, it would not be enough, nor do you want a new suit."

"I am of a different opinion," said Mr. Dorrimore, looking at her steadily: "you seem to have a very imperfect understanding of the family necessities. Here, Jack, I will give both you and Tom a couple of sovereigns apiece: you can rig yourself out for that sum, I suppose?"

Once more he applied himself to his well-filled purse, which it seemed to his daughter he handled with an ignoble satisfaction, counted out the money and handed it over to the astonished boys.

"Don't lose much time about the outfit, Sybil," he said, preparing to leave the room and shooting this Parthian arrow behind him: "when Jack is decently clad I will take him to Dorchester."

On the head of the stairs he encountered Julian Karslake coming up, and started back nervously, his self-command quite shaken at the unexpectedness of the recognition.

"Ay! Mr. Karslake—at last?" he stammered: "better late than never. I am very glad to see you; shall we go into the library? We have a good deal to say to each other."

"Thanks; but I was told you were out and that I should find the children in the nursery. I want to know if Jack has quite got over the fright he gave us."

"Oh, quite unnecessary; he is right enough! Come this way with me. I have been expecting you every day for the last three weeks."

A flush of annoyance rose to Karslake's face; he could not be rude to his host, still less to the man who was in his debt, but he was equally resolved against a private colloquy with Mr. Dorrimore. He knew Sybil was within the apartment, for he had heard her father address her, and it was to her only he wished and purposed to speak.

"If you will excuse me," he said, and went forward and knocked at the door.

"Come in!" cried a chorus of voices, and he entered.

It was the first time he had ever penetrated so far into the family interior, and the first glance at the assembled group told him something was amiss.

Sybil was standing by the table with an expression of mingled trouble and pain in her pale face; she and Jack seemed to have started apart from some closer embrace, for the boy was still hanging about her with the spaniel-like demonstrativeness of his age. Tom had turned eagerly about to face the new-comer.

"Oh, is it you?" he cried, with a pleased look: "we wondered who it could be. No one ever comes up here,—or at least no one ever knocks when they come. Why, we have never seen you since that morning, and now you are going away!"

"Yes," said Karslake, "I am going away, and that explains the reason why I have taken the liberty of coming up here. I wished to say good-by to you all; also I wished to see with my own eyes that Jack was none the worse for his ducking. I need scarcely ask if you are all right again."

"Yes," answered Jack, sheepishly, "I am all right, thanks to you. Perhaps I ought to have written to thank you,—you see, I didn't know it at the time,—but all the same I am very much obliged to you, and so is my sister: aren't you, Syb?"

She had not yet raised her eyes and looked at him. Her attention seemed fixed upon the five golden sovereigns that the little girls were still fingering upon the oaken table, her strongest mental impression at the moment being that he saw them and must know whence they came. The shame of each separate coin seemed to burn like red-hot metal into her soul. None the less was she bracing her courage to go through the task to which she had pledged herself.

"I am so very much obliged to Mr. Karslake," she answered, still without raising her eyes, "that I should like to thank him alone by myself. Tom, dear, take all the children away for a little while and give them a swing."

There was a murmur of approval, and then they all trooped out at once, smiling and nodding at the visitor as they passed him; and the two, for the third time in their lives, were alone together.

The meridian sun of a fierce June day was blazing through the wide undraperied window, revealing with ruthless splendor all the bareness and ugliness of the large, half-furnished apartment. From the uncarpeted floor to the blank walls, from the clumsy uncushioned wooden chairs to the broad deal shelf that ran the length of one side of the room and was covered with a miscellaneous litter of the most incongruous description, there was not a point of comfort or touch of beauty. What charm there was gathered round the living figures,—the girl whose shabby clinging dress seemed to possess the grace of classic drapery because it defined accurately the faultless lines and curves of the figure beneath, and whose sad proud face, with the hair brushed back from the temples and gathered up into a heavy coil behind, could have won no higher beauty from the most elaborate costume of Worth or Elise.

On the other hand, the simple perfection of Karslake. mourning dress seemed precisely in keeping with the singular refinement and high breeding of his physique. A beautiful woman may be able to defy the accessories of dress, but a man, however graced or gifted by nature, suffers more or less, but suffers inevitably, from obvious deficiencies of the same.

Sybil was still standing at the table with her interlaced fingers resting upon it. Her dress was of some dark-blue fabric, and the sleeve tight to the arm, without ruffle or white linen to soften the contrast between it and the fair rounded wrists. The delicate symmetry of the small flexible hands, a little browned by exposure to the sun and air, he had noticed before, but he did not therefore fail to notice it anew. From them his eyes slowly travelled to her face, the pain and pallor of which struck him with a pang.

"Why do you stand?" he asked; "there is a chair near you: will you not sit down?"

"That seems to be your formula," she answered, with the faintest possible smile touching her lips: "those were the first words you said to me in Datchley Wood. But I would rather not sit down. I have a great deal to say, and I like to stand at my work." Then at length she raised her eyes and looked at him, but still she did not blush: she had strung her courage and resolution to martyr-like tension. What lay before her was no girlish difficulty, but a stern duty, to be fulfilled without betraying the weakness of the flesh.

Her companion had some intuitive perception of this: he apprehended by magnetic instinct that she was going to offer herself as a victim on the altar of family expediency, and involuntarily his brow contracted and his face grew stern and set. He would accept no such sacrifice,—cold surrender for living devotion; nor would he help her reluctant attempts at self-immolation.

He remained silent therefore, as if awaiting further explanation, although he knew he made her difficulty greater; but her spirit rose to the emergency.

"May I ask why you are come?" she said, with gentle deliberation; "whether it is in answer to my father's request, or just simply to say good-by to us all before you go away?"

"Just simply to say good-by to you all."

He was well aware this was not the answer she expected; he even perceived that she doubted its truth, from the brief flash of indignation which lighted up her face. He met her glance, however, with the same quiet resolute look as before.

"At the same time, I quite understand that you wished to thank me personally for saving Jack's life. I did save it undoubtedly, but at so little personal risk as to reduce the obligation to a minimum. Still, as a matter of course, you would be sorry to owe to me even so little as that: did you expect me to say I was come to receive your reluctant gratitude? Let it pass: I will consider myself thanked."

"And have I nothing to thank you for but saving Jack's life?"

"Nothing."

She smiled a little bitterly. "I quite understand; but there is no need to try and spare my feelings. I know all we owe you. You have saved us from disgrace and ruin. It is through your intervention that we are able to remain a little longer in our old home. It is through you again that my father is able to supply the pressing wants of the children, on a scale to which we have never been accustomed,"—she indicated the money on the table as she spoke. "In plain terms, we are pensioners on your bounty; nay, do not deny it. I have seen the cheque you gave him."

He suffered her to go on, for he saw she was bent on accomplishing the task she had set herself, nor was it his intention to betray the intense sympathy he felt as he watched her victory over her shame and her pride. He was scarcely conscious how his own cheek flushed and his gaze softened and kindled as he dwelt on her vivid, expressive face.

"I am scarcely likely to deny a fact," he said. "It is quite true I have persuaded Mr. Dorrimore to accept an inconsiderable loan, but I am grieved that you should know of the transaction and extract all this weight and pain of obligation from it. Simply, it was not on your account but his: you have no debt to pay."

She was silent: what was she to conclude from this guarded reticence on his part? Would her submission come too late? had he reconsidered the matter, changed his mind, given up his persistence, and decided to accept his ungracious dismissal?

A trifle turned the current of feeling in each; at the same moment she heard Mr. Dorrimore's voice in the garden below, protesting sharply against some childish transgression, though her anxious endeavor to distinguish who was the culprit was unsuccessful.

The eager solicitude of her look touched Karslake to the quick.

"I wish you would sit down," he said, coming near to her and pressing the comfortless wooden chair on her acceptance; "and do not, I entreat you, think it necessary to thank me any more for my good deeds. They have failed utterly since they have become an additional burden to you. I had bound myself to complete silence on the old theme this morning," he continued; "but to see you like this—pale, harassed, unhappy—is more than I can bear. Under what conditions and restrictions will you allow me the blessedness of helping—not you, but yours, for whom you feel so keenly,—just as friend or brother might?"

Sybil drew a deep breath. He had taken her unresisting hands quietly in his, and she suffered them to remain. She felt the power of his self-restraint as well as the beauty of the face bent down in anxious scrutiny of her own, in every nerve of her susceptible and high-wrought temperament. But she was equally aware that no touch of passion or thrill of love responded to his own.

He was all that was qualified to inspire it, only—he did not inspire it. Even now her cheek was pale, and the look that she raised to his steadfast and unabashed.

"You are very good," she said,—"so good that I shall take courage and say all that was in my mind. My poor father has the sad prospect of a disappointed and harassed old age before him; I see my darling brothers growing up without training and fit education, and threatened with a life of drudgery and separation, and—I cannot bear it! You have offered before to help them on certain conditions, and I was blind to their needs and my own duty. Tell me again it is in my power to repay your charity!" she concluded, with sudden vehemence. "Make my task a little easier!"

And then a wave of painful crimson slowly dyed her cheek and neck, and she withdrew her hands from his grasp and turned away from him.

What should he do? Should he anticipate her further humiliation and accept the sweet boon that a few weeks ago seemed hopeless of attainment, and smother his refined objections in his love?

While he hesitated, she spoke again, in a low, subdued voice:

"It is not possible that I have been mistaken in thinking that your liberality to my father arose in a measure out of your professed regard for me? that when you first spoke of what you could or would do for us, it was to reconcile me to the withdrawal of my poor faculty of help? Also you have pressed the same offers upon him by letter as well as by speech,—offers that met all the conditions of our need. In return I understood—I believed——"

"That I wanted you so sorely for my wife," he interrupted, at length, in compassion of her cruel embarrassment, "that I increased the bribe—doubled the bidding—according to the measure of your reluctance? Is that what you thought?"

"I think it was something like that," she answered, with a dreary smile, "and I thought it an ignoble proceeding on your part to attack me on my weakest side, my love to my family. But I was wrong; you are not that, and I was arrogant and ungrateful; since then—that is since I saw you last—I have been taught humility; and now if the gift of all I have at my disposal is still of any value——"

"My darling, my darling," he said, approaching her passionately, "I do want you sorely for my wife. The desire of yesterday is cold to that of to-day. I love you, Sybil, with a perilous strength, but yet not quite in such unmanly fashion as to take you on these terms of sacrifice, as a mere equivalent for paltry pecuniary claims. No, not if I loved you better than I do, and you were still nobler and fairer than you are."

"Then," said Sybil, lifting up her sad pale face, "I have nothing more to say, and all is over between us. You must leave me to bear my own burdens, of which my unpayable debt to you will be the heaviest of all."

"But you have made it more than ever impossible that I should leave you thus. Under any circumstances I shall try and assuage the keenness of my disappointment by persuading you to suffer me to help you to bear your burdens. And then from time to time I shall ask you, as I ask you now, if there is no other alternative possible but gratitude or rejection?"

He had seized her hand and felt she was trembling from head to foot, her color changing, her eyes veiled and downcast. These were hopeful symptoms to the yearning passion he was holding in check. He tried to draw her towards him, and she offered no resistance.

"Sybil," he whispered, in tones dissolved to tenderest appeal, "I can be content with a little,—a tithe of what I give you. Speak! I am hungry for one kind look or word: is it too much to ask?"

A slight repressed shudder passed through her frame; the conflict in her mind was different from what he supposed, but it was over. If she would have her sacrifice accepted it must be more absolute than she had contemplated at first. She raised her sweet eyes to his, wet with emotion.

"You threatened to constrain my love," she said, "and such prophecies fulfil themselves sometimes. I will pay our debts with the devotion of my whole life."

He seemed to snatch the words from her lips with passionate, resistless kisses. What further admission could he ask from the proud, ascetic girl? Then he paused on his sudden and unexpected rapture.

"You love me, Sybil? say it again!"

She bent towards him, for he was almost kneeling at her feet, and touched his forehead with her lips with a sweet pathetic gravity.

"I have never loved any one, nor will I ever love any one but you. Will that suffice?"

There was the sound of heavy footsteps and the rattle of knives and glass, announcing Hannah's approach with the preparations for their early dinner, together with the rush of the children's feet and the clamor of their voices. Sybil *drew herself* away.

"Go," she entreated. "I am not equal to any explanations to-day. Meet the children and say good-by to them outside."

"And you—when may I see you again?—this evening?"

She started. So soon! was the inward protest of her mind, but to him she answered,—

"Yes; only you must let me fulfil my promise to the children, and go with us for a walk to Fulwood Common."

CHAPTER XI.

THERE is a dim region in the distant wilds of Bayswater called Burnham Square. It is of unimpeachable respectability and of a gloom that may be felt. The houses surround on three sides a sylvan enclosure in comparison with which Draper's Gardens and Finsbury Square are gardens of delight; but the inhabitants who have the right of entry to the same regard their privilege as a badge of distinction. The fourth side opens on the main thoroughfare, and commands the doubtful advantage of uninterrupted omnibus traffic.

In one of the smaller of these substantial houses Gilbert Helstone lived, his household consisting of himself, his mother and sister, and three female servants. One of these, a powerful middle-aged woman, was rarely, if ever, seen by the world outside, being in fact, as it is not our object to be in any way mysterious, the personal attendant or keeper of the lunatic Mrs. Helstone.

Why a man of worldly experience and practical sense should burden himself with so tremendous a responsibility, and by so doing destroy the happiness of two lives, may appear strange; but it was the issue of a point of honor.

He had pledged himself to a dying father not to place her in an asylum, at a time when her mania was but slightly developed and her physical health seemed sinking fast, and he had renewed the pledge again and again under stress of piteous pleading in the lucid hours of the unhappy woman.

Since that time, dating now far back to the years of early manhood, the mental disorder had increased and the bodily weakness diminished in an inverse ratio, until the hope of release by death faded into an incalculable distance.

For the most part the madness took the form of obstinate and destructive imbecility, but there were occasionally bursts of violent frenzy, which taxed the resources of the household to the uttermost. Theirs was a secret difficult, but necessary, to keep, and the very length of time it had been preserved strengthened the necessity for keeping it.

Sara Helstone had sacrificed her youth and her happiness to this terrible claim, or rather had chosen to share her brother's burden in spite of protest and disclaimer on his part.

She had once been fair, but now at thirty-five had scarcely a trace of beauty remaining: solicitude that never slackened and watchfulness that dared not relax had lined the smooth brow with wrinkles, contracted the open gaze, and set hard lines about the once curved and smiling lips. Character and temper had suffered equally: she was heroic enough to remain at her post and keep the long day's guard in Gilbert's necessary absence, but not sufficiently heroic to keep in considerate check the passionate irritability and impatience which meanwhile had been seething in her taxed heart and brain. She reserved the outcome for him, often making his daily life intolerable, spoiling his dreary meals and sending him from his home, or receiving him back again so sore and embittered in spirit that it was hard to forbear telling her that the greatest mercy she could show him was to leave him to fight his battle alone.

Look at her now as she sits at the breakfast-table waiting for Gilbert's appearance before she pours out the coffee, carefully prepared by her own hands according to his taste, and you can perceive that the comparative placidity produced by a tranquil night's rest is yielding to angry vexation caused by his being late. She is tall and thin, with clear-cut features sharpened now to unlovely acuteness; she has a mass of light brown hair, ill-arranged and already breaking away in slovenly disorder from the confinement of the comb. It is high summer, and the sun that streams into the room has almost a tropical power, though it is not yet nine o'clock, but her dress has no seasonable coolness or freshness, and the linen at throat and wrists is soiled and crumpled. One would say to look at her she had scarcely cast a glance in her glass, and indeed it is many a day since Sara Helstone had cared to study the points of feminine nicety of attire.

The door opened, and Gilbert entered.

"I am afraid I have kept you waiting," he said, "but—I overslept myself."

She looked at him steadily, and a change came over her face; the knitted brow and tetchy lines about the mouth relaxed, and an expression of softness and tenderness succeeded that for the time being was almost a transfiguration. The hand that was holding his cup towards him shook a little, and as her eyes met his the color rushed into his face.

"It was a blundering lie, Sara, and you have detected it. No matter: I am glad you were not disturbed. It is over now: she is exhausted and quiet."

"She did you no harm?"

"None," he answered, meeting her searching gaze frankly; "none, beyond robbing me of my night's rest. Is the post come in?"

She rose and pushed the letters towards him, and watched him curiously as he turned them indifferently over. Presently she saw the languid look quicken as she expected.

"Ay, what is this? A letter from Dorrimore! wonders will never cease."

He broke the seal and read eagerly, and as he read his face flushed and darkened, and a scarcely restrained oath broke from his lips. He put down the letter with a gesture of repugnance, and looked across the table at his sister.

"Are you in a mood for a guest, Sara?" he asked, and it was not difficult to guess at the hidden pain from the sneering bitterness of his tone. "A young lady with a pot-full of money coming up to London to buy her wedding-clothes, and who can think of no other friend to take her in but you, of whose existence she has scarcely been aware! It is of a piece with Dorrimore's selfish impudence."

He tossed the letter to her as he spoke, pushed back his cup and chair, and began to pace the room impatiently. His nerves were unstrung from the cruel experiences of the past night, and there was consequently less power of resistance to the rage and passion of his soul.

Mr. Dorrimore wrote blandly to say his daughter was definitely engaged to Julian Karslake; that the marriage was fixed for the early autumn; that Roosden Magna, or even the county town, scarcely furnished sufficient facilities for providing a suitable *trousseau;* and that it had occurred to him that his old friend Gilbert Helstone would receive Sybil for a few weeks in order that she might have the benefit of his sister's judgment and experience. He also added that Mr. Karslake's London living, to which he had been recently appointed, being in their immediate neighborhood, would give the young people opportunities of meeting frequently under Miss Helstone's chaperonage, and that her advice would also be invaluable to them in regard to the furnishing of the rectory house.

"Since when," asked Gilbert, stopping before his sister's chair, "has Herbert Dorrimore had this lively sense of your capacity? Faugh! the base satisfaction of the man with his infamous bargain makes me sick! he has not the spirit of a whipped hound."

Sara folded up the letter deliberately; on this point she had no sympathy with her brother; the symptoms of a mental disturbance she could not understand vexed and irritated him.

"Why does all this put you out so much?" she asked, in the cool measured tones which are best calculated to chafe the temper of an angry man. "I thought you were very fond of the Dorrimores' eldest girl; why do you object to her making a good match? And it must be a very good match indeed if Mr. Karslake is the bridegroom."

Helstone gnawed his lip savagely under his thick moustache: this phlegmatic recognition of the position of his rival was like pouring vitriol into his wounds.

"How comes it," he asked, sharply, "that you are so well acquainted with Mr. Karslake's income?"

"I am not only acquainted with his income," replied Sara, buttering her dry toast with careful attention, "but I am in a sense acquainted with Mr. Karslake himself. If you ever went to church you would know he read himself in at St. Mark's about three weeks ago. The living is valued at twelve hundred pounds a year, and his churchwarden told me—you know he is our grocer—that he has considerable private means besides. He has already begun to furnish his rectory *en prince.*"

"And on what law of shameful inequality was a living like St. Mark's given to a man rich enough without it, and with no qualifications for its duties?"

Sara shrugged her shoulders. "Does your ignorance of church matters go so far as to make you think preferment is bestowed according to need or merit? Though, as for the latter, Mr. Karslake seems a very excellent young man, and with no conceit about him in spite of his good looks. I think I shall like to have the girl here. If you like, I will answer Mr. Dorrimore's letter."

He stood by the window a few minutes before making any reply, and looked out into the square. Every leaf on the trees was white with dust, and not a leaf stirred in the still air. A nursery-maid and a troop of children were slowly perambulating the dismal enclosure, and so quiet was it that he could distinguish her shrill impatient tones as she checked and scolded her charge with quite unnecessary zeal.

As he gazed there came over him a profound sense—perhaps deepened by this trivial incident—of the injustice and contrarieties and burdens of life. The lurid scenes of last night, the wearing trouble of his own lot, mixed themselves up with the sense of Sybil's sacrifice and Karslake's easy unmerited triumphs.

But the triumph was not yet completed; perhaps it was not altogether an adverse fate that was drawing the lines of Sybil's destiny under his own hands. He turned round and sat down to his untasted breakfast.

"Write if you please," he said: "we could scarcely refuse to take the girl in. It will be a diversion to you to buy wedding-clothes; only ours is a dangerous house for a guest."

"She need know nothing, but that our mother is an invalid unfit to be seen by strangers, and a girl with her head full of a handsome lover and pretty gowns will not be over-curious in such matters: nothing makes us so selfish as happiness. But her coming is not all; we shall have to invite Mr. Karslake to visit her here: no doubt they will have arranged that he should meet her at the station."

"If Sybil Dorrimore is to be our guest, Sara, no one will *meet her at the station* but myself. Mr. Karslake will have to postpone their reunion. As for coming here——" he set his teeth hard, as if to keep in the injurious expressions that rose to his lips, and, meeting his sister's steady look of penetration, added, quietly,—

"We will wait and consult the lady on the matter."

"I must be off," he added presently, after a few minutes' rapid discussion of his neglected breakfast. "I have an appointment with Stainforth at the House at twelve, and great men must not be kept waiting by little ones. Good-by."

Three days afterwards he was standing on the platform of the Great Western Railway, waiting for the arrival of the Dorset train. It was not due till five o'clock, but he had been there for the last hour, pacing up and down with a restlessness as uncontrollable as it was new to him.

He had hitherto been a patient, self-controlled man, accepting his hard lot with a quiet magnanimity, and considering himself as irretrievably cut off from the hopes and passions of his happier neighbors. Now he was conscious that all this was changed. The stern hand of Necessity pointing back from love and bliss to the rugged heights of Duty no longer swayed him to obedience, but provoked a sense of protest and defiance. Since he had admitted to himself that he loved Sybil Dorrimore with all the strength of his strong repressed nature, and that she did not love the man she had consented to marry, he had begun to question what should withhold him from trying his own chances and upsetting a mercenary bargain.

Was it not a crime to condemn any woman to a loveless marriage? still more, one of her strong capacity for joy or sorrow?

Karslake utterly failed to move her. Might it not be in his own power to stir her latent heat and wake up the slumbering passion of her nature? That such susceptibilities existed he was certain: God forbid that she should first become conscious of them when that consciousness was sin! From such a contingency it was duty as well as interest to save her.

And yet he knew while he argued thus that he was cheating his own soul,—planing the downward slope to dishonor. But he had chosen to shut his ears to his voice of conscience and give the reins to self-will and opportunity.

The bell rang, the hiss of the expected train was to be heard, and he had only just time to turn sharply back to that point of the platform where he had ascertained the passengers would alight. He was under the impression that Sybil would travel first-class, and had taken his stand accordingly; but he was at fault. In vain he looked for her sweet face at the blue-curtained windows.

At the same moment he was aware that he had received a checkmate: Julian Karslake, who had only stepped upon the platform five minutes before, had found himself almost opposite to the second-class carriage where Sybil sat, and was now in the act of helping her out. In the state of mind into which Gilbert Helstone had worked himself, the natural incident seemed a premeditated insult and interference; he cleared the space between them in a couple of strides.

"Excuse me," he said, hotly, "you take my duties upon you. Miss Dorrimore is my guest."

Karslake dropped the hand he had taken and stepped back, possibly to avoid the chance of a collision, then slightly raised his hat in recognition of the speaker.

"I did not see you were here, but even as her host you will scarcely object to my paying my respects to my future wife. I conclude you know we stand in that relation to each other, and I must ask your leave to allow me to visit her at your house."

He spoke with perfect temper, and as if slightly amused at Helstone's heat, and as he finished he took Sybil's hand again in his and looked at her, as it seemed to the other, with a cool proprietorship hard to be endured. Still, he was conscious that he could not make a fool of himself on the Paddington platform, and he compelled himself to some barely conventional phrases. Sybil herself had stood gravely looking from one to the other during the brief colloquy: she now drew away her hand from Karslake and gave it to Helstone.

"It is rather hard," she said, "on Miss Helstone that she is not only asked to entertain a girl she does not know, but the girl's friends as well. Mr. Karslake will let us have this evening for becoming acquainted with each other. You will not mind his calling upon me to-morrow?"

"He knows my sentiments towards him," answered Helstone, *with a harshness* he made no attempt to subdue: "It remains for him to decide whether with such knowledge he can come as a guest to my house, and for you in that case to fix the times and seasons. But I shall take it as a favor if he will confine his visits to the hours when I am absent from home."

"The master of the house has a right to dictate his own terms, and I have no choice but to accede to them," said Karslake. "I will call upon you, Sybil, at twelve o'clock to-morrow." He took her hand, bowed over it till his lips touched it, raised his hat, and departed.

The girl watched him out of sight with an indefinable expression in her eyes and an aching sense of pain at her heart; as she lowered them she met Helstone's intent gaze.

"You see," she said, in a low tone, "it has all come about as I told you it would. But why are you, the kindest of men, so uncivil to him? Had he been any other but himself, he must have quarrelled with you."

He was busy securing her luggage and made no answer, but when they were seated in the cab and fairly on their way he said,—

"I mistrust the man who can keep his temper under any and every provocation. I see your future, Sybil: he will wear out your living soul with that mechanical and perfunctory goodness of his! He excites in my mind an instinctive antipathy and suspicion."

"Then we will not talk about him, for if he did not excite in mine the warmest gratitude and esteem I should be a base and disloyal creature. I don't know why you describe his goodness in such harsh terms · it is not justified by my knowledge of him."

She spoke with the generous warmth of one defending the wronged and the absent, but it was natural that he should attribute the glow on her cheek and the vibration of her voice to some deeper feeling.

"You will find my sister more sympathetic: she 'sits under' Mr. Karslake, and is prepared to admit all the perfections you have so opportunely discovered."

Sybil was silent; there was a chill on her feelings caused by finding her old friend less generous and true than she had expected: it jarred on her delicate sense of honor that he should disparage her lover to herself. She leaned towards the window and watched the dreary suburb through which they were passing.

Helstone's irritation would not allow him to remain quiescent.

"What has become of the objections and drawbacks that were so influential three months ago? There seems now an absolute unanimity between you."

She turned round and looked at him with a grave reproach in her beautiful eyes. "Do you quite understand that I have promised to be his wife?"

"And your blind submission begins this side of the altar?"

"Precisely so, if you will convey a reproach. I look upon a contract as binding when the agreement is made: the adding of the signatures is but a matter of form. And the contract on one side is so unequal that it will be hard work for me to redress the balance."

"Come," he replied, cynically, "this is a different mood from that you showed in Datchley Wood,—in the forlorn old library at Ashlands. I scarcely thought that you had such a full share of the prudent adaptiveness of your sex. How long did you take to discover Mr. Karslake's merits? you were stone-blind to them when we parted last."

"I refused to admit them," she answered, in a low, suppressed voice, "but I knew all the time that they existed; and from the moment I made up my mind to accept the generous help he offered us, I bound myself to pay the debt with every equivalent in my power. Would you have me do less,—you whom I have always fancied honest and chivalrous as the knights of old?"

He met the wistful sweetness of her eloquent face, and had some difficulty in stifling a groan beneath a sneer.

"Take care," he said: "you are wronging us both. I am myself about as poor a moral hero as you will be likely to meet, and if Mr. Karslake is the piece of matchless perfection he would have us believe, I will never trust my instincts again. But we will waive the discussion. Here we are at the door of my house, and the next step is to introduce you to my sister."

CHAPTER XII.

The condition of engaged lovers is popularly supposed to be idyllic. The cynical may sneer at the period of illusion and foretell the swift awakening at the touch of rude reality, but even they admit the existence of a sweet spring-time. We doubt, however, very much if the enchantment is often so thorough or beatific as imagined, especially in these days of clear-sighted calculation of ways and means and of complicated yet imperative requirements.

And it is not as if the desire and demand only touched outward and secular needs: there is less simplicity of feeling and singleness of purpose than of yore. The old superstition of the omnipotence of love is laughed to scorn; it is no longer held to be equal to the constant harmonizing of discordant elements or to the providing of a perennial stimulus to exertion. The man ponders now on the eventualities of the girl's development and the contingent results of her previous experiences, and she, in her turn, pauses to deliberate whether, when the flush of love-making is over, there is grace and strength enough in her lover to sustain the stern ordeal of perpetual companionship.

Sybil Derrimore had not only asked herself these questions, but had decided to answer them in the negative. On the strength of her superficial acquaintance with his character, she had reached the conclusion that she and the man she was going to marry were not akin. She knew equally well that she did not love him: she was simply marrying him in the interests of her family, as absolutely a sacrifice as modern conditions would allow; but in order to make that sacrifice effectual she must not suffer Karslake to know that anything of the kind was involved. And also, in order to meet the demands of personal honor and truth, she must live and move and have her being towards him animated by so devoted a loyalty that the absence of a tenderer emotion should defy detection.

She did not deceive herself so far as to think this would be easy, but she did think it would be possible. Outward observance should be so solicitous and so complete that the living fire of loving impulse should never be missed.

Happily, she said to herself, her lover was not demonstrative or exacting; in truth, he accommodated his demands to the natural reticence and tender asceticism of the girl he loved, taking what she allowed or gave him with a generous forbearance to which she did very inadequate justice.

On all practical points she deferred to his and her father's wishes implicitly. Although nothing could have been more distasteful to her mind than such a hurried fulfilment of their engagement, she made no overt objection to the proposal that they should be married in the autumn, and yielded still further when it was suggested that she should go up to town to superintend the furnishing of her new home and to afford the opportunity of daily intercourse.

No one who watched her—and Gilbert Helstone watched her very closely—would ever have imagined how intense the tedium of that daily intercourse sometimes became. The sweet solicitude of her manner towards Karslake, the real warmth of her gratitude for the services he had rendered, took so bewitching a form that it would have been difficult to distinguish it from tenderness.

Then she could not help taking a healthy girlish interest in the furnishing and decorating of the gloomy but substantial old rectory-house which was to be her future home. It was an appeal to an indulgence of artistic tastes and womanly instincts which had hitherto been denied all scope. To make the rooms beautiful and harmonious as far as might be, was a task that excited her easily kindled enthusiasm. Karslake supplied the experience and judgment needed in the work, she the invention and adaptiveness. And there was small difficulty in carrying out mutual schemes and theories with all the art resources of London at command, and a balance at one's banker's that seemed to Sybil to represent the idea of exhaustless wealth.

"But we will not fill up every nook and crevice," Karslake had said on one occasion; "we will buy some of our household treasures in Italy, Sybil. I have seen such things in dingy stores in the back streets of Milan, and in holes and corners of Rome and Venice, as would make your eyes sparkle with wonder and delight. We will go together and hunt them out."

"I fancy," she answered, looking at him with the grave but tender smile that gave such a charm to their intercourse, "that if I am ever happy enough to find myself in either of these cities I shall have something better to do and think of than finding bric-à-brac for our drawing-rooms or even pictures for our walls. If we go, Julian, shall we ever be able to persuade ourselves to come back and live at Bayswater?"

To him, with her for his companion, Rome or Bayswater were alike, or rather on all grounds he preferred the latter; to her, life under southern skies and in the art cities of Italy would have such fresh springs of inspiration and delight as would make the forced observance of her duty almost an easy thing.

Since she had left Ashlands and, as it were, washed her hands of her responsibilities, she had experienced a painful sense of loss and emptiness. To live and work for others had been the business of her life hitherto, and now that she found herself standing at ease and an object of ceaseless attention and solicitude, the novelty of the situation was positively distasteful.

A few days before coming up to town she had parted from her brothers on their way to Winchester, Karslake having run down to Ashlands on purpose to take the boys to school.

They were in the highest delight, only just qualified by the pain of separation. Jack said, "his foot was now on the first rung of the ladder, and it would be his own fault if he did not get on in the world. Syb should see."

As they all stood together waiting for the train at Crewkerne Station, her thoughts recurred to the contents of the trunk at their feet, which included such school-boys' outfits as had completely staggered their crude ideas of what was necessary or desirable. The boys were allowed to believe all this outlay was met by their father, which was ostensibly the case, and were full of surprise and gratitude; but she knew from what source his purse was supplied, and moreover whose was the generous kindness and good sense that had arranged the details.

When she had made some objection to what seemed to her the extravagance of the outlay, Karslake had said, with a singularly pained and reluctant manner,—

"You must let me manage these matters; I am no stranger to them. I had a brother once to whom I stood in the relation of fatherly care-taker, there was so much difference of age between us. He taught me exactly what boys want at school."

"A brother! You had once a brother and this is the first time you have mentioned him!"

There was an implied reproach in her astonishment; a secret sense in her mind that here—in this lack of fraternal feeling—was another proof of the want of sympathy between them.

"It is probable," he answered, "that I shall never mention him again: I have done so now from a scruple of conscience which already appears to me unnecessary. I considered you ought to know."

Sybil looked at him in earnest surprise. There was a contraction of pain on his face, a vibration of suffering in his tone, that struck her as different from anything she had observed in him before. Was it possible his quiet exterior concealed some family secret or corroding memory? And if it did, she had no right to press with questions the man to whom they were all so heavily indebted.

"You will, of course," she replied, gently, "always obey a scruple of conscience for your own sake, but never think it necessary to tell me anything that is painful for mine."

"Thank you!" he had replied, as if he felt her absolution a profound relief, and no more had been said on the subject; but the incident had left a shadow on her mind.

Now that she found herself a guest for an indefinite time under Mr. Helstone's roof, and cut off, as we have said, from her natural duties, Sybil's instinctive desire to help and identify herself with the needs and interests of those around her had no outlet except towards her reserved and irritable hostess. It was very easy for her to perceive that Sara Helstone carried a burden of care, and the girl did her tender and skilful best in the effort to lighten it. Her intellectual gifts and exceptional training had never induced any weariness of, or distaste for, the common routine of daily life and practical duties, and she offered her services about the house, or at the work-table, or in any way her kindly ingenuity suggested, with an eagerness to be useful that could scarcely be withstood.

Miss Helstone felt her heart softening towards the stranger in a way that surprised her. She had never expected that a girl *that knew Greek* and understood logarithms could have been so unassuming and engaging. She ceased to wonder at the infatuation of her brother in Sybil Dorrimore's regard, or that a man like Julian Karslake, who might have chosen where and whom he pleased, held that he had won in this obscure and portionless creature the priceless pearl of his life.

How it came about she scarcely knew, but before Sybil had been her guest a fortnight she had confided to her their household secret, and felt an infinite relief in pouring forth—when once the flood-gates were opened—to the grave and tender girl the pent-up sorrows and denials of her life. And as Sybil held her hand meantime, pressing her lips with reverent sympathy upon it, the elder woman was conscious of a balm and solace in the contact that seemed to quicken the slow courses of her blood.

"Child," she said, wiping away the unaccustomed tears, "I need scarcely impress upon you that what I have told you must not be told to Julian Karslake, no, not even when he is your husband. Gilbert would never forgive me if he thought I had betrayed our secret to him. But somehow, without assurances, I feel it will be safe with you."

"Quite safe. I will never have a secret of my own from Mr. Karslake, but I shall know how to keep those of my friends."

"And will you be willing to let him have secrets from you?" asked Sara, more from a wish to divert the conversation into a lighter channel than from any special interest in the subject.

Sybil's mind reverted instantly to the air of mystery with which her lover had referred to his brother, and her face clouded with an expression of anxiety and dissatisfaction.

"I cannot say: the idea is a very disagreeable one to me, but I suppose all of us reserve certain rights. If I were aware of a secret, I should, I think, ask to have it cleared before we stood in the relation of husband and wife."

The more she thought about the matter,—and she did think of it continually,—the more did her judgment confirm this passing impression, until she had come to the deliberate decision that she would take the earliest opportunity to reopen the question with Karslake.

Such an opportunity occurred a few days afterwards, as they sat resting on a solitary couch in the vestibule of Burlington *House* after a long inspection of the crowded walls.

"Do you remember," she asked, "telling me how much you knew about me even before our acquaintance began,—how minute and intimate your knowledge was? Since then there are few of our family concerns that have not come under your notice; but I seem to know so little about you."

"In what way? You know my pedigree,—who was my father, who was my mother. Mine has been a very uneventful life. I was under the care of guardians from a boy. I went to Winchester and Oriel. I spent two years in foreign travel. I took orders, and Roosden Magna was my third and last curacy."

She was silent, but her eyes met his with a pained, dissatisfied expression.

"This is the barest outline of your life," she said, at length. "Do you wish me to believe it has been so bald and meagre as to furnish no personal experiences at all?"

"I should make a bad autobiographer. Question me on any point, and I will answer you."

"Were you alone on your travels?"

"No," he answered, smiling; "my guardians would have thought it an obvious neglect of duty to have trusted so raw a youth to his own devices amidst the snares of foreign lands; my tutor went with me."

She hesitated, and the color rushed into her face. "And your brother being so much younger than yourself was still at school or college? I am a poor diplomatist, and will own frankly that I am very anxious to hear something more about your brother."

His brow contracted; it was not a movement of pain, but one of absolute displeasure. "Then I must have misunderstood what you said to me when this subject was last mentioned between us? or else the delicate consideration you showed then was a mere passing influence. Sybil——"

He spoke her name and paused upon it as if to demand her solicitous attention; and she, who had never known him before under this aspect, drew herself up involuntarily and returned his grave attent gaze with proud surprise. Having hitherto been sued as goddess, a fall to mere humanity chilled her for the moment.

"May I ask if any circumstance has quickened your curiosity on this point?"

She did not speak, simply because her spirit rebelled against replying *to a question* asked in such a tone of cold authority.

After waiting a reasonable interval, he repeated it with a slight variation of terms. As in all moments of strong excitement, her eyes flashed and dilated, while her cheek grew pale.

"It is an insult to my feeling in this matter to stigmatize it by such a term as curiosity. Cannot you understand that reflection may have led me to think differently from my first impression, and to object to the existence of a mystery between us as a constant source of speculation and uneasiness? To my view it must be something terrible that makes one brother cut himself off from the other. On the eve of a life-long companionship," she added, in a lower tone and one that trembled with passionate emotion, "there should be no disloyal reserves or concealments: they will make danger for the future. My whole life is open to you; yours is a sealed book to me: is that fair? is that wise?"

"Fair! wise!" he repeated. "I think you scarcely recognize that your language implies not only condemnation but a threat, and yet it is scarcely possible for me to resent any words of yours. Unhappily, I see you have imbibed an impression on this point unfavorable to myself, though it was equally open to you to believe that my reserve, far from being disloyal, was an act of reluctant fidelity elsewhere. The silence I should have maintained respecting my brother had he been living is additionally binding upon me now he is dead. I have nothing more to say on the subject. I do not think we will discuss the point any longer."

Sybil's lip curled a little, though hitherto a sneer was almost unknown to her face.

"It would not be seemly to do so," she answered, "for your manner implies not a request but a command."

"Only—you are deeply offended, and your faith in me is shaken?"

There was nothing of deprecation in his tone; the lines of the straight brows and round the finely-cut mouth were deepened, and there was a latent fire in his eyes that testified to strong feeling held in check. As she glanced towards him she received a renewed impression of the beauty and power of his face. She turned a little aside and shuddered slightly; she felt at once repelled and attracted. If hitherto she had cherished some unconfessed idea of easy conquest over a nature weaker than her own, it was gone forever.

"I suppose," she replied, "I am offended, but not deeply; I have no right to be that; and I have the same faith as ever in your honor, but not in—the simplicity of your character. I feel as if I had been looking up into a cloudless summer sky and some drops of a sudden thunder-shower had fallen on my face."

"And do these new lights make you hesitate about the safety of trusting your happiness in my hands? It is not too late: draw back, Sybil, if you are afraid."

Her heart gave a great leap. The idea of recovering her liberty stirred her for the moment like trumpet-tones, but the next she remembered her bonds. There was but one chance of freedom.

"Shall I ask you, in my turn, if you want to cast me off?" she asked, with a slight smile. "For my own part, I have no wish to draw back. I am not afraid, though the path is not so clear and straight as I thought it."

"I cannot talk in tropes. Yesterday I should have thought it was impossible that I could have offered to release you from your engagement, but yesterday I should equally have thought it impossible that such words as have passed to-day could have been spoken between us. In spite of your assurance to the contrary, you mistrust me; there is a lurking doubt in your mind as to what your judgment would be if you knew all the facts concerning my brother and myself. I see plainly that your own passionate sisterly affection distorts the matter out of due proportion. Another point is this——" he stopped, as if to give her the opportunity of reply, but, as she remained silent, he went on:

"I love you already immeasurably more than you return the feeling, and have tried to reconcile myself to the difference by believing that my devotion, proved in daily and hourly intercourse, would quicken yours; but there is no hope or chance of this if your trust in me is weakened. Think it over, Sybil. Discuss the subject, if you choose, with Mr. Helstone and his sister, and let me know your decision when we meet again."

She was silent with pain and astonishment. It was a turn of affairs so unexpected as to leave her at a loss how to speak and act. One confused thought at length found utterance.

"It is hard to believe in the strength of your love when you can so easily conceive the idea of letting me go."

"It is not easy, but there are circumstances in which a man had better pluck out his right eye or cut off his right hand than peril his future. A married life even with you, where faith was lost, or at least suspicion lurked, is an experience I could not endure. Sooner than that, utter loss—unsatisfied yearning——" his voice fell.

"You conquer me," she said, "as you have never done before."

She was hardly aware she had made the admission until the words had passed her lips, but there was no sign of the triumph she had feared in his face.

There was the same quiet intensity, thoroughly under control, which had characterized his manner throughout the discussion, and which she recalled to her mind was in lesser degree his habitual manifestation, but never before had it so seemed to subjugate her senses and her imagination. He was still silent, as if her answer had not satisfied him. What extent of admission, what measure of assurance, did he want? She could not bring herself to lay her pride lower at his feet. At the same moment she perceived Gilbert Helstone making his way towards them.

"Here is Mr. Helstone," she exclaimed, with a sense of unspeakable relief. "He promised to come and show me his favorite pictures if he could get away from the Temple in time. Shall we join him?"

He bent towards her so as to look into her face.

"You have not answered me," he said.

"What do you expect me to say? I will consider the advice you have given me and adopt it, at least so far as concerns myself. You will come and see me when you see fit, and learn my decision?"

He signified assent and rose up. The shadows of late afternoon were gathering round the place; the scattered groups of sculpture gleamed more vaguely in the softening light; only a few knots of people stood here and there in the thinning galleries, talking and laughing in a lowered key, for every sound was becoming more audible in the increasing silence.

"I can leave you now in Mr. Helstone's care: he is better cicerone than I. Farewell. I shall see you again ere a week is out."

He bowed over her hand till he touched it with his lips, as was his habit, stopped on his way to say a few words of courteous greeting to Helstone, and passed out.

CHAPTER XIII.

HELSTONE strode up to the couch where Sybil was seated and threw himself beside her. He leaned forward and looked anxiously in her face.

"What is wrong? There is trouble in the air. Has he brought that pathetic droop to the lips and intense light to the eyes?"

He compressed his own lips to restrain the injurious epithet that always sprang to his tongue with any mention of her lover's name.

"Have you quarrelled,—parted, please God?"

Sybil felt distressed and uncertain. Her experiences hitherto had granted her little practice in that absolute control or concealment of feeling which intercourse with society and the buffets of every-day fortune help to give. The painful perplexity of her mind showed itself in her expressive face, do what she would to banish or regulate expression. Moreover, there was something in the suppressed eagerness of Helstone's manner and the flash of his eyes as he bent towards her, that gave her a sensation of embarrassment.

"I am ashamed to be so poor a dissembler," she said, rallying her spirit. "You are right in thinking there is something wrong, and I am distressed at having offended him."

He uttered a passionate expletive. The thought in his mind was how he would have watched and waited on her mood, and fenced her round from the faintest brush of care:—*distressed.*

"Child," he said, "you cut me to the quick. I have given up pretty well all concern for my personal happiness, but yours is dearer to me than that ever was. It must not be spoiled by this man. That he has the power of distressing you makes my blood boil. You have trusted me hitherto: trust me now!"

She passed her hand over her brow deliberating. She had been bidden to consult this friend, but her native sense of loyalty revolted from the idea. It was perhaps well that at this moment the bell for departure rang, and the few stragglers that remained began to move towards the stairs. He drew her hand through his arm with the tenderest solicitude.

"At least," he said, "it is in my power to take care of you a little longer. Your precious lover has never thought of giving you anything to eat, I'll warrant. We will take a hansom, and recruit nature at Blanchard's, and then—it is the last night of 'Les Huguenots'—we will go and hear Nilsson the Divine, and forget all the troubles of earth. To my mind she is the ideal Valentine."

They carried out his programme, very much to Sybil's delight. In Helstone's society there was a sense of ease, a happy consciousness of loving favor and absence of criticism, that she certainly did not as yet enjoy with Julian Karslake. On this occasion she gave herself up to enjoyment without stint and without alloy of care. She would waive the consideration of her difficulties till alone at night; they should not come between her and these hours of passionate rapture.

Possibly the charming little dinner *à deux*, in which Helstone had taxed his ingenuity to provide those dainties which were likely to tempt a girlish epicure, had something to do with raising her spirits and touching her cheek with its lovely carmine tint, seeing that she was no spiritual ascetic but a sentient human creature, apt to receive pleasure at every pore of her being, physical as well as mental. The keenness of delight she now experienced as she sat rapt and inspired under the combined spell of the magnanimous pathos of the play and the witchery of the singer was intensified to absolute anguish,—her own identity for the time being lost in that of Valentine. Helstone sat well back in his chair and gazed his fill at her, knowing she was unconscious of his regard. He too was wont to lend his whole soul to the adorable *prima donna*, but tonight, if her charm were not less, it only served to stir and deepen personal feeling.

Every impassioned accent, each yearning embrace, stimulated his own love and quickened the restrained heat of his own heart. The face and form of Sybil Dorrimore, her very posture and expression, had enough of charm and grace to excuse some extravagance of passion; the beautiful intent face, with its luminous eyes dilated and delicate lips tremulous with ardent sympathy, did it not indicate a depth and power of sensibility that would faint and sicken in the dull and torpid atmosphere of Karslake's measured love?

Would she not wake up sooner or later—ay, it would be later—to find herself bound to that most bitter and ignominious of all slaveries,—a marriage of the corporeal alone? Worse: he had already troubled her peace of mind; now in these halcyon days of their courtship she had spoken of herself as "distressed" at having offended him. Offended him! she whom he himself knew to be generous and good to the stretch of magnanimity, to be cast down under the displeasure of a man who had purchased her regard by a kind of underhand bribery, and whose quiet assumption of superiority was as smoke in his nostrils, utterly to be mistrusted and contemned.

And yet, were all this doubly true, she was his guest under conditions that appealed so strongly to his honor that he was tongue-tied. He could not reveal his love to a girl who was trusted to his care as a betrothed bride: only if he saw just cause to interfere in the interests of her own happiness he would use his opportunity of deliverance to the uttermost. And further, he said to himself, as he watched the changes of her expressive face, he would not force the truth upon the unconscious girl to whom he was naught but friend and brother, even if he were free to speak. What had chiefly disgusted him with Karslake had been the cold-blooded pertinacity with which he had constrained her to his will.

That night, after Sybil had gone to her room, it was her turn to sit and consider the future about which Helstone's mind was busy. The moon was at its full, and sailing through ether as blue and cloudless as was at the same hour arched over the hills and downs of her beloved Dorset. She put out the candle and sat down by the open window. The dust-laden trees and formal paths of the square below were transfigured into beauty in the moonlight air; the traffic of the neighborhood was at its lowest ebb, for it was long past midnight.

She crossed her arms upon the window-ledge and pillowed her dainty chin upon them, looking out into the night with grave introspective vision.

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"Many a time," she said to herself, "if I marry Julian Karslake, shall I look out upon such a scene as this and yearn and long for the old house at home; many a time shall I feel the same doubt and discontent and impatience with my life. How I shall miss the kisses of the little ones and the fierce huggings of my boys, and dear old Hannah's friendly gossip! Shall I seize my chance, and tell him I will take him at his word and get back my freedom?"

Yes, that was the question to answer. Her head sank lower till it was buried in her arms, and for a few moments of concentration she weighed the arguments for and against the decision.

Had he a right to claim from her this blind trust in his perfection? it was in that way she put it to herself. Did he suppose her a girl likely to surrender her faculty of judgment so far as his conduct was concerned, and accept his brief assurances with the implicit docility of a child? Oh, if they did but stand on equal ground she would let him go, albeit there was an unconfessed attraction that even now brought a faint flush to her cheek and a quicker pulse to her bosom; but how was it possible, when they had taken his money and his gifts, to deprive him of the only recompense in their power?

Could the boys be fetched home from Winchester again, and her father held responsible for the large sums of money he had shamelessly accepted from his son-in-law? Or could she support life under the burden of such obligations if he refused, as he probably would refuse, to withdraw them? No, better than that the fulfilment of the contract under any conditions.

"And in truth," she said to herself, "I do not doubt his sincerity: I seem to accept without misgiving the quiet and unostentatious evidence of his daily life. Also if the noble sweetness of his face belies him, he must be a consummate dissembler indeed."

She closed the window and lowered the blind, the unclouded moon still giving light enough for her simple preparations for bed. But at that moment the silence of the night, brooding and solemn as it always is, was broken by the sound of an unnatural scream, or rather yell, again and again repeated. There was the simultaneous sound of hurried footsteps, of voices in eager interchange, and of heavy weights, it might be of furniture or otherwise, dragged persistently over the floor.

For a moment Sybil stood stricken with instinctive terror; the next, the recollection of the miserable calamity that hung over the Helstone household rushed across her mind. Here was the explanation of the sounds which seemed to grow more horrible as she listened. The tones of the maniac's voice became articulate; but could it be a woman that vented her rage and malignity in curses so appalling that they might have chilled the blood of the most hardened blasphemer? What, too, was the meaning of the ominous movements that seemed to gather significance as the minutes succeeded each other? She fancied she could distinguish Helstone's voice, but it was low and suppressed, suggesting the sickening idea of a mortal struggle; then there were the prompt but heavy footsteps and low authoritative tones of a woman's voice; all other sounds, however, were blurred and dominated by the discordant shriek, or oath, or laugh of the maniac.

It was not many moments Sybil remained a passive listener: the impulse was instinctive to offer what help was in her power.

She had extinguished her light, and the upper story of the house was unfamiliar ground to her, but the moon was still shining in a cloudless sky, and the noise itself would guide her to the scene: she swiftly bound up her loosened hair and laid her hand on the handle of the door. At the same moment it was opened from without by Sara Helstone.

She was ghastly pale and trembling from head to foot; the look of determination in Sybil's set pale face struck her with surprise; she set down the lamp she carried and put her back against the door.

"Where were you going, child?"

"To help, if possible. I wonder you are not there: are you afraid?"

"Afraid! yes, for him, not for myself. I have attempted to enter and was thrust out. Do you think you could do anything? a baby like you snatch him from a madwoman's grip! Hush!"

She stopped and listened intently to the sounds overhead: the scuffle seemed to become more desperate, then there was the noise of a heavy fall, succeeded by an awful silence.

The two women looked at each other with eyes glazed with terror, then Sara turned and laid her shaking hand on the lock of the door.

"God in heaven!" she gasped, "has the worst happened? My limbs fail me; I have not the courage I once possessed. Child, if you will, go and see what has happened."

Then, rallying as suddenly, she seized Sybil's arm, who had turned at once, eager to obey.

"Am I mad too, to send you on such an errand? Gilbert would never forgive me. Stop! listen! is that his voice? Thank God, it is: then, no matter, no matter."

She grew calmer, still holding Sybil's arm and interpreting the sounds that reached their strained ears.

"Those are his footsteps; then it is she who has fallen. He is speaking to Mrs. Joyce: they are lifting her up, carrying her to bed. Oh, God! would it be a sin to pray she might never rise from it again?"

Then a brief silence fell between them. Sybil drew a long breath of relief: she could gather from what she heard that her worst fears were groundless. Helstone's voice was clear, his footsteps firm, but still a great horror held her. That miserable woman was his mother; had she received hurt at his hands?

A little longer, and they heard him coming down-stairs; Sara flung open the door and called him.

He came eagerly towards them.

"That is right," he said, "to find you together. All is well. I was coming to Sybil's room to see how she had borne the fright. I cannot forgive myself for having subjected her to it. We should have no friends, Sara; our roof should never be offered as shelter to outcast or miscreant even, still less to her."

He was gazing at her with eyes still aflame, as she thought, from his recent excitement, rendered all the more conspicuous by the pallor of his face and the disorder of his dress. In point of fact he was drawing rash deductions from the sight of the passionate sympathy with which she was regarding him.

She had come quite close to him and laid her hand on his arm:

"Is it true that all is well?" she asked, in her low vibrating tones; "you are not seriously hurt?—nor she?"

His brow lowered a little. "She is more hurt than I could wish, though her hurt is small. Her keeper, thinking me unable to take care of myself, interfered between us and threw her by some sudden manœuvre learnt in other scenes than these. But it was an alternative to which I pledge myself, Sybil, she shall never resort again."

Sara had not yet spoken, but her eager eyes had been examining his person from head to foot, and now she touched his throat and pointed to the left hand that was hanging by his side.

"This must end," she said, in a dull saturnine voice, "even if I turn informer myself. How little more would have made this horrible struggle a death-struggle to you! Look at the print of her murderous fingers round his throat, and the mark of her teeth in his hand! And yet he will scarcely exert his man's strength against her fury. This is not the first time by fifty——"

"For God's sake hold your tongue, Sara, and don't scare Sybil out of her wits! Mine is the best of sisters, but she has the gift of magnifying our troubles. I have a scratch on my hand that a sponge will wipe out, and for the rest—" he smiled a little faintly—"it was perhaps the maternal instinct exaggerated and distorted by disease. Poor soul! do you forget that she loved us once, my girl?"

The tears welled out over Sybil's eyelids; she scarcely knew how eloquent was her face of tender pity and approval, till Helstone suddenly snatched her hand and pressed it to his lips.

"God bless you, child," he said, hoarsely, "and pay you back for all the sweet sympathy and love you have shed around you! Go to bed now and sleep in peace: she is quiet and exhausted, and these outbreaks don't often occur. Come, Sara, bid us good-night."

"Not till I have seen for myself that things up-stairs are as safe as you say. Why, Gilbert, this girl was coming to help you!"

She moved away as she spoke and began to ascend the upper flight, leaving the two standing alone together.

It was in Helstone's mind, still overwrought as he was by the late excitement, to yield without resistance to the impulse quickened to passionate intensity by Sybil's tender sympathy, throwing on one side the scruples that had held him hitherto, and plainly telling her that he loved her as no other man did. Was not the moment auspicious when her own feelings had been so strongly moved in his behalf, and she had also just quarrelled with her lover?

Could a woman who looked at him with such passionate pity in her lovely eyes be hard to win to a feeling deeper and stronger still? He came nearer to her.

"You would have come to my help?" he said.

The words were simple enough, but the inflection of voice, the eager glance, the scarcely restrained gesture, gave them a meaning difficult to misunderstand. A certain vague uneasiness she had felt before in their recent intercourse returned upon her mind and sent a flame of color into her pale face. But to doubt the honor of the man whom she had loved and honored all her life was an idea to be rejected with indignation, if possible.

She returned his burning gaze with a direct, steadfast glance.

"Can you doubt I would have helped you if it had been in my power?" she said, gently. "One would have felt the same impulse towards a stranger, much more towards the oldest and best of friends. The only comfort I can find in the midst of this terrible trouble of yours is that you are equal to it, and justify the affection and trust we all feel for you. Do go and rest now or you will not be fit for your duties to-morrow; we idle women can do as we please."

She held out her hand with her sweet grave smile, and he was scarcely aware in what a strenuous clasp he held it. He was full of yearning admiration for the tender severity with which she had recalled him to his duty.

"I am very tired, too," she added. "I hope we all may sleep too sound for dreams."

"Good-night," he said, and dropped her hand, and then stood for several minutes longer, watching the door that shut her out from his sight.

CHAPTER XIV.

WHETHER it were the result of physical or mental causes, Helstone felt so little in tune for work the following morning that he left his chambers, after an abortive struggle to fix his attention to the matters in hand, in despair of doing any good.

It was Saturday, and a long summer's afternoon stretched its weary length before him. He had no wish to go home. Then it occurred to him that the operatic concerts at the Crystal Palace were in full swing; he would go there and kill the hours. He could sit and devour his own heart unnoticed amidst the crash of the orchestra, or cheat his pain as the solo of some incomparable singer reached his ears.

He went, but found it was still early when he arrived; even after the diversion of luncheon, to which he had recourse in the extremity of his weariness, there was a long hour before the concert began. Many of the people, indeed, had already taken their seats and were possessing their satisfied souls in patience, but his mind rebelled against such vapid inaction.

He strolled vaguely over the building, looking absently at everything but receiving no definite impression, till he found himself at length in one of the least known and frequented of the Eastern courts. There was no great attraction in its desolate bareness save its coolness and repose, and Helstone had sauntered almost round the enclosure before he became aware that there were other occupants of the place besides himself.

But with the discovery every trace of languor vanished, and he stood rooted to the ground with an astonishment that almost amounted to disbelief in his own senses, and then shaken by a spasm of wrathful indignation it was hard matter to hold in check.

A man, woman, and child were grouped together in a recess formed by the pillars of the structure. Concealment had evidently been their object, and under ordinary circumstances it could not have failed to be obtained.

The woman was young, and beautiful as well, so far as Helstone could judge from the imperfect view her position allowed; she held her hat drooping from her hand by its string, and she was sobbing so bitterly as to be fain to lean for support on her companion's shoulder. At least the golden head was pillowed there without let or hindrance on his part.

A boy of three or four years old, prettily dressed in the extreme of a fantastic fashion, stood on his other side and pressed with childish exigence against his knee, evidently trying to divert his attention towards himself.

The man was Julian Karslake, and the little face lifted towards him was a tender miniature copy of his own, so absolute in resemblance that the most casual glance from the dullest observer could not have failed to mark the fact.

It was a pregnant discovery, and the rush of emotion it excited was, as has been said, almost beyond Helstone's control.

His first impulse was to rush towards them and charge Karslake on the spot with the infamy of his treachery, force the truth from the weeping woman, and hurl his wrath and defiance at his head.

But a moment's reflection forbade this: whatever the turpitude of the man's dishonor, the grief and privacy of the woman were sacred. No: he must restrain his vengeance till a more convenient season. All he did was to cross the court swiftly so as to pass directly before Karslake's sight, confronting him for a moment with a gaze of uttermost aversion and contempt.

As he strode out of the Palace (for the amenities of the concert were no longer to be contemplated), his brain was in a whirl, but unquestionably the paramount feeling of his mind was one of triumph. He had always disparaged and mistrusted the man, and his prescience was justified by the event.

Now, without controversy, he was at liberty to snatch Sybil from the hands that would have dishonored her; now there was cause enough to break that hateful bargain. Nor was there any chance of escape for the criminal, for this was no case of circumstantial evidence: the facts of the accusation had been seen by his own eyes. An absolute passion of disgust moved him as he recalled the late scene. The studied privacy of the locality, the beauty and distress of the girl, the lovely child-head raised in innocent appeal, and the pallor and dismay of the central figure, as he perceived Helstone's recognition, were so many damning points against him.

And this was the man who had played the pious curate for three long years at Roosden Magna,—who had knelt by dying beds, mouthing the prayers of the church with elaborate hypocrisy, and pressing first to his own perjured lips the sacramental cup,—who had professed a Joseph's chastity as a lure to the girl who hung back from his advances! This was the man who made a parade of every cheap virtue under heaven,—of saving life when there was no risk to his own, and of heaping alms because he held wealth as naught beyond a loan for his neighbors' needs! This was he who must have broken the heart and ruined the life of the woman who had trusted him, and repudiated every tie with the child for whose existence he was responsible! The beauty of his person, the charm of his manner, the secret attraction of his individuality, only enhanced his guilt.

Thank God, it was not yet too late to save Sybil! What steps should he take to make his discovery effectual? That was the next question. Had Mr. Dorrimore been a man other than he was, the most natural and straightforward course would have been to put him in possession of the facts and take his advice upon them. But so great was Helstone's contempt for him that he doubted whether the father would not choose rather to sacrifice his daughter than his own pecuniary interests. No, he must act on his own responsibility, and also must be on his guard against being carried beyond reason by the strength of personal feeling.

Helstone's first idea had been to relate to Sybil the discovery he had made, convinced that the indignant and outraged girl would cancel the engagement at all costs. But, as the first excitement cooled, wiser and juster thoughts prevailed.

True, it was inconceivable that any exculpatory explanation of the scene he had witnessed could be given by Karslake; but perhaps honor, or at least generosity, demanded that the latter should have the chance,—a chance, however, which Helstone's generosity would scarcely have afforded him had he not been morally convinced of its futility. Distasteful as the proceeding would be, he would see him face to face in his own house, prefer his accusations, and give him the opportunity of defence. Neither would he take him at unawares: he would write and fix day and hour for the interview.

By this time it was close upon the dinner-hour at Burnham Square, and he had walked and reasoned himself into a calmer and healthier condition of mind. He would go home as usual; on this occasion he was sure to find Sybil there; her lover was otherwise engaged, and the perpetual companionship would not be enforced to-day. He caught his train, and was fortunate enough to report himself in such unusually good time as to win Sara's approval of his punctuality.

As he stood in the little dining-room, waiting for the entrance of the ladies into the opposite apartment, which he never cared to enter alone, he could not help observing that there was a completeness and grace in the arrangement of the table that had hitherto been an unknown condition in his experience. Linen and silver had always been fairly clean and bright under Sara's rule, but now there was a charming arrangement of fruit and flowers in ruby Bohemian glasses of which both form and color were perfect.

Doubtless the manipulation was Sybil's; but whence had come those costly and fragile vessels? His brow contracted as the thought occurred to him that they had probably been an offering from Karslake to his sister, for he was quite sure such an investment was equally beyond her taste and means. In that case it was the last time his table should be polluted by their use.

Then he strolled towards the window and took up a book open, face downwards, on a chair from which he had seen Sybil rise to greet his return. It was a volume of Dr. Newman's sermons, and Karslake's name, in his own admirable handwriting, was on the title-page. He flung it from him almost with a groan of disgust, and then, hearing the ladies come down-stairs, joined them in the drawing-room.

At dinner there was a restraint over the whole little party. Helstone naturally was inclined to be taciturn, and the others had scarcely rallied from the excitement of the previous night.

Sara, keen to notice any change in her brother's physiognomy, was struck by the preoccupation of his manner and the restlessness of his aspect, and did her best to stimulate him to talk as he was always wont to do when Sybil was present.

"Sybil has had a very dull day," she said. "Mr. Karslake has not been to see her, and she has been reading sermons. In my young days people never read sermons except on Sundays."

"And that is the day," returned Sybil, smiling, "when I particularly enjoy a novel."

"I should fancy your knowledge of sermons rather limited," said Helstone. "Did you ever read one before? Newman will scarcely get the benefit of comparative criticism. Do you profess to like the book? you read to order, of course?"

"I never profess, and I frankly own I do not like it. But then I imagine the voice of the Baptist crying in the wilderness was very unwelcome to the mixed population of Judea. Newman's preaching is quite outside my own experience; at present I have never felt that strong coercion of disappointment and vanity which is the dogma of all moralists from Solomon downwards."

"And you fondly hope to escape it?"

"Not entirely; but I do not mean to let it crush all my hope and faith in human nature under its weight. Newman is a modern Baptist, denouncing what seem to me even natural and legitimate instincts as sin in the sight of God. You know I have not been brought up to think much about *sin*."

"My dear," said Sara, "Mr. Karslake would be very much shocked to hear you say so."

It was very much to the credit of Helstone's forbearance that he made no reply to his sister's remark, though a smile of bitterness curled his lips.

"Is that sneer meant for Julian or me?" asked Sybil; "for his scrupulousness or my laxity? But please understand me, Miss Helstone:—I do not mean I have not been taught to distinguish right from wrong, only it has been on broader grounds,—the sense of what was due to my own moral being and my neighbor's welfare. That minute accountability of a creature to a personal God on which Newman insists seems to me mechanical and dogmatic; at least it is alien to my turn of mind."

"Dogmatic!" repeated Helstone. "So far as I know anything of Newman's speciality, he is simply nothing if not dogmatic."

The eloquent blood rose in Sybil's cheek, her eyes flashed;

for this girl could defend the honor of an author with the passionate ardor most of us reserve for our own predilections and interests.

"Little as I know of him," she said, "I know more than that. Dogmatic he is, but with such a power of personal conviction and such uncompromising courage in expressing it, such a superb indifference to the judgment of his fellows, and such marvellous faith in God, as stir my lighter soul to its depths, or rather reveal to me a depth I had no knowledge of before."

Her voice sank a little; she was confused by Helstone's intent gaze.

"Dear me!" said Sara Helstone, sarcastically. "I looked at one of the sermons, and I thought it rather commonplace; but then I am not clever or a critic. I see the sermons are called 'plain and parochial,' and I thought they answered exactly to their title."

Sybil smiled, but with no touch of mental superiority.

"There is a refreshing absence of fine writing, an absolute disdain of rhetoric: I think few of us like that in a sermon. This man seems to me as if he had deliberately stripped himself of intellectual graces, holding that he was pledged to present the truth of God in its naked simplicity and sternness. But what is the result? A power, an intensity, that penetrates below all superfices to the very core and marrow of one's being."

"That is scarcely the style of Julian Karslake's sermons?" remarked Helstone, sardonically.

"That is scarcely the style of one man in a thousand," said Sybil, smiling; "but it strikes me you have never heard Julian Karslake preach."

"And God forbid I ever should!" muttered he, as he rose to open the door for their exit. "You need not hope to enjoy a long gossip *tête-à-tête*; I shall drink no more wine to-night."

He wrote his note to Karslake, however, before he joined them in the drawing-room,—proposing to call upon him on Monday evening at eight o'clock, if he would give him an interview.

"I hope I shall trouble his Sabbatic tranquillity: he will scarcely have the audacity to see Sybil between this and then.

Faugh! Conceive of him standing up before the people and exhorting them in the way that they should go!"

The letter was posted late at night, and the second post on Monday brought an answer to it. It stated in cold but sufficiently courteous terms that Mr. Karslake was unavoidably compelled to be absent from town on Monday till a later hour than that named by Mr. Helstone, but that he should be at home at the time mentioned on the following day.

Helstone crushed the letter vindictively in his hand: there was a coolness of effrontery in it, he considered, hard to bear with patience. Possibly—nay, probably—his engagement might be in the interest of Sybil's rival; and he had the weight of his unspoken condemnation to endure for another twenty-four hours longer.

As he set himself anew to a stern consideration of the matter, a certain feeling of impotence came over him. How he wished that Karslake's offences brought him within the pale of the law! If he should deny the facts, what testimony had Helstone to bring in support of his accusation? If he chose to assure Sybil of his honor and fidelity with that smooth tongue and unabashed steadfast mien, would not the girl believe her lover rather than her friend?—the more so as he had openly acknowledged prejudice and mistrust?

On the preceding day, Sunday, the ladies, as usual, had attended morning service at St. Mark's, and he had ascertained that, also as usual, Karslake had done the duty.

Sara had remarked that she very much preferred his style of sermons to Dr. Newman's, and, though Sybil had looked with an amused smile at Helstone, she had added "that she liked his sermon herself better than usual, and almost thought it would have won a measure of approval from him."

Helstone looked at her steadily. "You have the most implicit faith in this man's sincerity?" he asked, almost sternly.

"In what way do you mean? Do you ask if I believe him to be as religious a man as he appears?"

"Not precisely that," returned Helstone, impatiently: "I mean, that whatever he chooses to tell you about himself you accept with complete reliance on his word?"

Sybil changed color and was silent. Was Helstone acquainted with the point at issue between them? could there be facts in his possession of which she was ignorant? The anxiety that still possessed her mind stirred painfully and quickened into new life.

Instead of answering his question she asked another:

"You did not know Mr. Karslake before you met him at Ashlands?"

"I did not," he said, dryly. "The only point I wanted to settle was whether you would break your heart if you found him unworthy."

At another time she would have resented a vague accusation as a breach of honor, but now this partial mistrust was contending against her generosity.

"You have some definite charge to bring against him?" she asked, in her low sensitive voice. "Will it not be better to speak out at once?"

"I would only too gladly speak, but I am tongue-tied at present. Have I troubled your peace of mind, child? Well, it was out of pity, lest the shock should be too sudden and severe."

He spoke ironically, and turned sharply from her, vexed that he had spoken at all. If there was anything needed to stimulate the rancor of his feelings towards Karslake, it was the unexpected look of pain in Sybil's face. The belief he had entertained of her fundamental indifference which would induce her to welcome any sufficient cause for breaking the engagement had of necessity mitigated in his view the consequences of her lover's treachery. But if he were mistaken, and she would suffer at his hands?

In that deplorable case what adequate vengeance would be in his power? He could take from him the girl he had outraged by the reversion of his ignoble love; possibly he might expose him before the world and cover him with public contumely; for priests were unfrocked even in these neutral days, and ignominiously turned out of the church they had dishonored. But, granting all this, the shame and ruin of Karslake's life would be but a poor equivalent for Sybil Dorrimore's suffering.

He felt as if he could scarcely control his impatience till the hour arrived when he would be face to face with his enemy and able to take the first steps towards his chastisement.

CHAPTER XV.

At seven o'clock on the following Tuesday evening Gilbert Helstone knocked at the door of the old-fashioned, massively-built, red-brick house known as St. Mark's Rectory, and was at once shown into the library, evidently as an expected guest.

"Let your master know at once that I am here," he said, flinging down his card with an abruptness he was little accustomed to use towards his inferiors; but the sleek, conventional manner of the man, and the abundant evidences of wealth and luxury by which he saw himself surrounded, stimulated the acrimony of his feelings.

"Mr. Karslake is at dinner, sir, but I will take in your name at once."

He felt relieved on hearing he was in the house, having entertained some suspicion that he would cheat him of the interview.

The man went out, shutting the door softly, but before doing so he put some coals on the fire, which was already too bright and fierce for Helstone's comfort, and placed some newspapers at his elbow as a suggestion for his amusement. Helstone pushed them aside impatiently, and, getting up from the comfortable lounging-chair into which he had flung himself, began to walk about the room and inspect its multitudinous contents with an ever-deepening indignation and disgust.

The apartment was of excellent proportions, and might have been called lavishly furnished and adorned, had not the strictest taste subordinated and harmonized its details. Not only was the furniture that marked its intention as library of the most complete and costly kind, but ingenuity seemed to have been exhausted in its construction to adapt means to ends, or rather to suggest ends that would never have occurred to the ordinary student. Even this Helstone might have pardoned in a weak-brained professional man who was conventionally supposed to spend a good part of his life in his study and at his desk; but what could excuse the Turkey carpet on the floor,—the glow and texture of the wine-colored draperies at the windows,—

the æsthetic pedantry of the high carved mantel and tiled grate,—the fine bronzes which lurked unostentatiously here and there,—and the precious engravings on the wall?

Helstone's mind recurred to the forlorn old library at Ashlands, which had been Sybil Dorrimore's only experience of literary ease, and he asked himself, with a sneer, if the man furnished his own rooms in this fashion, what more could he deem necessary for his bride's special apartments? Then there was a fire in the grate; and this also seemed to him another proof of effeminacy and self-indulgence, though the July evening was sombre and chilly enough to excuse the same.

He sat down again with a more concentrated feeling of animosity than before: hypocrite and Sybarite combined!

A little longer, and he began to grow impatient and to resent his being kept waiting as an intentional insult: he was yearning for the conflict—for the certain triumph of confronting and confounding his foe—almost with the intensity of a wild beast held at bay. He had put his hand on the bell with the intention of sending a message to the master of the house, when the door opened and he entered. Helstone turned sharply around.

Karslake was in evening dress, as perfectly attired as if he had been entertaining at his own table or going out to dinner, and the fact marked a sharp contrast between himself and the negligent morning costume of his visitor,—as sharp as between the statuesque beauty of his face, the close-cut hair and delicate golden moustache, and the irregular features, bushy beard, and generally careless physique of the other.

He went close up to the fireplace near which Helstone was standing before he spoke, and then he said, in the cool but courteous tones of distant acquaintanceship,—

"I am sorry to have kept you waiting, Mr. Helstone, especially as it must be a matter of no common importance that has induced you to come to my house."

For a moment Helstone was staggered by the audacity of his self-possession. Was he about to ignore or deny the incident of Saturday? But he was on his guard against injuring his own case by any premature violence of speech or manner. He contented himself with surveying the speaker from head to foot with a deliberate insolence of regard which, if bestowed upon himself, he would have held as the most intolerable of insults, but he spoke almost as quietly as Karslake himself had done.

"Do you remember the warning I gave you in your cottage-garden at Roosden Magna?—namely, that I constituted myself the guardian of Sybil Dorrimore's welfare? I am come to redeem the pledge."

"I remember the circumstance perfectly, and I am as much at a loss now as I was then to recognize your right of interference. Let us face the matter at once, Mr. Helstone; there is no need of any circumlocution between us. I know what has brought you here to-night, and it is quite superfluous for you to come to the attack with the foils on. Deliver your soul of what you think it right to say. I am prepared to listen."

His color rose a little, there was a latent fire in his glance, and an inflection of a repressed indignation in his voice, but tone and manner were under perfect command. The cold authority of his speech exasperated Helstone beyond endurance. Were the tables to be turned upon him, and he, the accuser, challenged to the encounter with an effrontery beyond calculation? An oath escaped his lips; he pushed back his chair and took a turn or two through the room, then stopped abruptly in front of the other.

"You presume to question my right of interference! Who should save Sybil Dorrimore from the wretched fate of marrying a villain but the man who knows she has no other friend? If I were a stranger, and accident had revealed to me the truth as it did on Saturday, I should be justified in warning a high-hearted and sensitive girl of the fraud practised on her credulity. You can hardly be prepared to go the length of denying what I saw,—another woman in your embrace, and the incarnate pledge of your loves by your side!"

He stopped, as if to give Karslake the option of reply, for he had made an instinctive movement that seemed to express repudiation; but, as he showed no disposition to speak, the other went on with increased bitterness.

"I have no strained notions of masculine morality, God knows, and have run riot like other men, or, may be, worse than many; but *you* have coerced Sybil Dorrimore on the ground of special purity and devotion and a holy immunity from vice and folly. The condemnation one feels for the lusts of the commonplace profligate becomes absolute loathing when one recognizes the priest and saint in the transgressor. You have spoiled the life of one fair woman, but, please heaven, you shall not spoil the life of another! You have flung out one little child upon a nameless existence, but you shall never be the father of Sybil's possible children!"

It is very difficult, under any circumstances, for one human being to defy the overwhelming and conscientious accusation of another, with perfect success. And it was no simulated reprobation that animated Helstone and moved him to an almost feminine eloquence of vituperation: the hate and contempt were alike genuine and generous. Nevertheless Karslake stood, as he had done from the moment of his entrance, in an attitude of cold attention, offering no interruption, betraying no sign of emotion.

He did not even lower his eyes, but continued to watch the speaker, through every passionate clause of his attack, with an air of unmoved and critical observation.

Helstone felt himself foiled and exasperated by his failure to provoke him to reply.

"You do well to be silent," he said, contemptuously, "and my task is almost done. I felt it incumbent on me to tell you my intentions previously to putting the facts of the case before the lady to whom you are engaged. Thank God, it is not too late to save her! What further action I may see fit to take in the matter, in the interests of religion and decency, I have not yet decided on."

"You mean that you threaten to inform Miss Dorrimore of the incident you witnessed last Saturday?"

"Such is my precise meaning: that I have not done it already is a stretch of forbearance on my part you had no right to expect. But, as a matter of form, I am prepared to listen to any attempt at palliation you will probably be anxious to make."

"You are mistaken," replied Karslake: "I have no such anxiety. Whatever explanation were possible, I should emphatically decline to give it to you. I repudiate your right of interference in our affairs. The patience with which I have listened to what you have had to say is due only to the regard which I know Miss Dorrimore feels for you, and perhaps to the belief I entertain of your sincerity. But I am none the less relieved to hear that you consider your duty as accomplished; mine forbids me to utter one single word otherwise in reply."

"Any other word would be superfluous," returned Helstone, with a sneer. "No man listens tamely to such language as I have used to you to-night, unless he recognizes its justice."

Karslake smiled. "I am scarcely to be entrapped into denial or admission by any superfluity of insult. I could almost congratulate you, Mr. Helstone, on the vent you have found for the ill will you always bore me. But, in reproducing the tableau you just now so vividly described, for Sybil's enlightenment, I demand you will not distort or exaggerate the facts, nor force your conclusions upon her mind as proven."

"Your solicitude is in vain, Julian Karslake: there is a weight of evidence in one single circumstance that no sane mind could resist. In the minute resemblance of the child to yourself there is a damning proof of your relationship which no ingenuity of false swearing or fervor of denial on your part can break down. And you may rely upon it I shall not let any scruple of mawkish delicacy invalidate the strength of my case. You shall not marry Sybil Dorrimore, though your house is furnished and her wedding-clothes are bought!"

For a moment Karslake seemed to hesitate. A spasm of pain, beyond even his strong power of self-repression, contracted his face. He turned away from Helstone's ruthless scrutiny, and, leaning over the high mantel, shielded his eyes with his hand.

"Wait a moment," he said: "I will consider it again."

Helstone watched him curiously: kindly as his nature was, he had no more sympathy for Karslake's evident suffering than the schoolboy for the cockchafer on the pin. No mental distress, in his opinion, could be adequate to the punishment deserved. He could not even leave him alone, but broke in on his considerations.

"Let me warn you that, if you were to propose to swear on the Bible the child were none of yours, it would not shake my conviction one jot: one breach more or less of what the lowest among us hold binding would be of small account to you."

Karslake looked up quickly. "Thank you," he said, "for you have unwittingly done me a service by the brutality of your insult. Had there been one human touch of pity in your reprobation, I might have been betrayed into the weakness of self-defence. As it is, we have surely now met and parted for the last time. It will of course be necessary for me to see Miss Dorrimore again, but it shall be elsewhere than under your roof."

"If it is in my power to prevent it, you shall never have speech with Sybil Dorrimore any more."

"But it will not be in your power," said Karslake. "And now, with your leave, I will ring the bell and bid you good-night. You hesitate! Have you any wish to try another turn of the screw?"

Helstone rose; he was going to speak, when the door opened, and the servant appeared in answer to the summons he himself had not heard. There was nothing for it but retreat. He took up his hat and went out, feeling that he had not half triumphed as he wished and expected. But perhaps he would have held a different opinion could he have seen the gesture of mental and physical collapse with which Julian Karslake flung himself into a chair and buried his face in his arms on the table before him.

CHAPTER XVI.

When Sybil came down to breakfast the following morning, Sara handed her a letter.

"Four days off duty have made me very uncomfortable, my dear; but now comes the explanation, and all will be right?"

Sybil took it with seeming composure, for she knew Helstone's eyes were upon her, but she felt the color rise in her cheek and was conscious of a quicker throbbing of her pulses. She was full of extreme anxiety as to the purport of that letter,—an anxiety which a few weeks ago she would have thought it impossible any communication from Karslake could have caused her.

Both host and hostess watched her while she read it,—the latter from the friendly desire of discovering whether Sybil was pleased with it, the former from the equally unmixed motive of observing how she received what there might be of dissatisfaction in it. He saw that it was very short and that she grew grave over the perusal; also that she read it through a second time before slipping it into the pocket of her dress. He waited for her to speak, but she remained silent and preoccupied, without glancing in his direction. It was a relief when his sister broke in impatiently.

"Well, Sybil, are we to hear nothing? are not his excuses sufficient?"

"I believe he makes none, but he proposes an excursion to Hampton Court, and asks if you and I will meet him at the station at two o'clock this morning. Will you be disposed?"

Helstone interposed harshly. "It is out of the question! you are under my protection, Sybil, and I forbid it. I am prepared to give you my reasons as soon as you please to listen, but neither you nor Sara shall consort with this man any more."

Sara stared at him with blank amazement: had it been night instead of morning she would have thought him under the influence of wine. As it was, a vague doubt made her shiver: was he losing his head?

Sybil seemed less surprised, but very much more displeased: there was a very calm but resolute purpose in her tone as she replied, still without looking at him,—

"I am sure you will not lay any commands upon me that I could not obey, or dissuade Miss Helstone from giving us the pleasure of her company. As soon as breakfast is over I shall be glad to hear whatever you may have to say to me."

Helstone's swarthy cheek grew pale; the girl was already in opposition.

"Does this——does this——" he hesitated: to forbear to pronounce Karslake's name without some opprobrious epithet required an effort of self-command, one to which he perceived from Sybil's now grave and steadfast look that she fully perceived and understood. "Does he write with the same assurance as before, without any recognition of difference or hindrance?"

Sybil hesitated. "Do you think it is quite fair to either Mr. Karslake or myself to ask these compromising questions, especially before a third person and one who is his friend?

Not," she added, quickly, turning towards Sara with that sweet graciousness which was so winning a charm, "that there shall be any reserve between us, so soon as I know the meaning of all this. Just now a little misunderstanding has arisen, about which Mr. Helstone seems to know more than I; but I do not believe it to be serious."

A look of almost superb scorn lighted up Helstone's face. Sybil encountered the expression, and a burning color dyed her face, the sensitive lips quivered a little. She turned to Sara.

"When Mr. Karslake parted from me at the Burlington House last Friday, it was quite understood that a few days should elapse before we met again. In this note he tells me that Mr. Helstone has an important communication to make to me, but requests that, if possible, after having heard it we will meet him as I have told you."

"If possible! Precisely so: the words are not ill chosen, and I tell you it will not be possible."

"On that point I reserve my right of private judgment. May I go into the drawing-room, Miss Helstone, and wait there till your brother is ready? I have not much zest for breakfast."

She stood for a moment and drank the cup of coffee already poured out for her, and as she thus stood Helstone's eyes dwelt upon her with an admiration kindled and quickened by hope. The graceful poise of the tall slim figure, with its delicate and tender curves, the beauty of the face, full as it was of emotion and expression, touched every fibre of his being. Should this guileless and noble loveliness fall to the share of a traitor and a cheat? Never, while the power of protest and exposure was his.

"I will follow you almost immediately," he said, but before he could do so Sara called him back.

"Gilbert, I know your secret, and I want to say just two words. You have heard some scandal about Mr. Karslake, and are going to take an advantage of it that in another man you would call infamous. Think twice before you meddle with what may turn out a more serious business than you expect. Mr. Karslake is not a man to be trifled with, nor, for that matter, is Sybil the girl."

"I have heard no scandal," he replied, dryly: "what I am about to tell Sybil Dorrimore are matters of fact that have come under my own observation." And he went out, leaving his sister staggered for a moment by so clinching a rejoinder.

He went straight to the window where Sybil stood awaiting him: there was something in the virginal calm and dignity of her aspect that checked for a moment the eagerness of his purpose.

"My child," he said, tenderly, "you and I have had many unconventional confidences before now: you will not hate me if what I am obliged to tell you hurts you very much?"

"If you are obliged," she said, "there is no question before us whether it hurts me or not."

There was such a quiet air of unshaken confidence in her tone that it restored the former bitterness of his feelings. He turned from her and threw himself into a chair at a little distance.

"I did not tell you last Saturday that I struck work, feeling more unhinged by the events of the night than I ever remember to have done before, and that in order to kill the time I betook myself to the Crystal Palace. There, quite unexpectedly, I met your husband-elect. How long is it to the wedding-day, Sybil?" She turned and looked at him with a sort of pained surprise.

"I cannot bear to hear you speak of Julian Karslake, not because you disparage him, but because you do such injury to your better self. As for our marriage, you know quite well the month of September is spoken of."

"My God!" he exclaimed, harshly, "you try my temper more than I can bear."

And then he told his story, deliberately, pitilessly, reproducing the scene, as he thought, with strict accuracy. But it was not so: he conveyed the idea of passionate response on Karslake's part towards the lovely woman weeping on his shoulder, whereas in point of fact his attitude had only been one of passive sufferance.

Sybil listened as a martyr may bear his torture, the blood rising and paling in her cheek, the eyes veiled and downcast, the interlaced fingers which had been hanging loosely before her tightening gradually their repressive grasp, but offering no interruption and asking no question. Even when he paused she did not speak or look up, but he saw she was trembling from head to foot, in spite of her proud effort to control the manifestation. He could not resist the impulse to rise and go near her, but she stepped back, and for a moment the luminous eyes, suffused with tears, met his with a flash of indignation so intense that he almost quailed before it.

"You call yourself my friend," she said, "and are able to tell me this without one scruple of compunction, one touch of pity! You are prepared to blast the life of this man with no feeling but triumph in your heart and a sneer on your lips! Even the pain and shame that I must feel are of no account to you——"

"None," he interrupted, "in competition with the pain and shame I shall spare you in the future. But I have not done yet: you think that Mr. Karslake can clear his reputation? I thought it was possible, and have given him the opportunity —in vain!"

He went over rapidly his visit to the rectory, detailing every damaging incident and presenting his own deductions from them as if they had been facts rather than impressions. Once or twice Sybil made a movement of interruption or inquiry, but checked it; she was very pale, but he saw from expression and attitude she had taken her resolution.

"Is that all—at last?" she demanded. "You have closed your case? You can at least have seen or heard nothing since last night?"

"I have nothing more to add," he replied, sternly, "except to renew my protest against your meeting Karslake to-day. It would not be seemly, it would scarcely be womanly; but you do not think of it?"

Sybil smiled bitterly. "You forget I have had to take care of my own honor and welfare since I was a child, and am scarcely likely to accept dictation in a matter like this. I shall meet him to-day according to his arrangement, and I hope for my sake you will allow Sara to go with me. It is hardly likely Mr. Karslake and myself will return together."

A spasm of anguish constricted her heart as she spoke, induced, she thought, by the keenness of the sense of her outraged dignity and faith; for if love betrayed had caused the pang, she would have refused to acknowledge it even to her most secret consciousness.

"He does not expect it," urged Helstone: "even he puts it as a contingency more than doubtful. 'If possible:' that is, if you can stoop so low as to hear and see him again."

"I would not condemn my worst enemy unheard, still less one who stood in so close a relation to all of us as Mr. Karslake does. Would it be reasonable to refuse him the opportunity of speech in a matter that is almost more than life or death to each of us?"

"To each?"

"Yes; you must think me strangely insensible if such a blow as this is to be struck upon my faith in human nature and leave no trace. You will let me go now, please: I must have a little time to collect my thoughts."

He got up and opened the door for her, his eyes following her with a passionate yearning pain. If he had not been checked by the certainty of her indignant contempt at such a crisis, he would have fallen on his knees before her and begged her to take pity on his love.

CHAPTER XVII.

It was a sultry morning, the first day of August; the heat was oppressive to exhaustion in town, but would only enhance the enjoyment of the green swards and sylvan alleys of Hampton Court Gardens. What outlet could be more delightful for lovers in their heyday of passionate altruism, and so richly endowed with all that could give additional charm and zest to life?

Something like this were the questions Sara Helstone was asking Sybil a few hours later, kindly bent on bringing back a smile to her lip and a little color to her pale cheek, also on superintending her toilet and preventing her from making a guy of herself because she was in trouble.

Her own faith in Karslake was unshaken. Helstone had departed for town without vouchsafing her any explanation, and her own good feeling withheld her from questioning Sybil, either directly or indirectly. To render such forbearance easy she was to be her companion, and would be able to make her own observations and draw her own conclusions.

"Do not consider me in the least, my dear," she said to her, as they walked slowly towards the station. "I have a novel in my pocket, and so soon as we get to a shady seat all I shall ask is to be left alone with it. But do you think it wise to look so pale?" she added, tapping her hand affectionately.

"I look as I feel," said Sybil, smiling down gratefully upon her friend.

"And you are pretty enough to dispense with color. I never flatter, but you look as if you had stepped out of some old canvas—say of Titian or Vandyck—with all the warm tints mellowed and harmonized by age."

The praise was not exaggerated; the girl wore a black dress of some thin texture over silk of the same color, draped with almost Grecian severity; some adjustment of muslin and lace about her shoulders, which had the tint of old ivory, and a broad-brimmed Leghorn hat with white feathers and black velvet.

"You have spoiled your pretty costume with that ugly sunshade," remarked Miss Helstone again, seeming to think conversation necessary to keep up her companion's spirits. "Where is the dainty toy Julian Karslake brought you the other day? Has it gone so far that his gifts are tabooed? Well, this is our platform, and there he is now to speak for himself. I never saw him in a gray morning suit before: how well he looks in it! but then nature has ordained that he must look well in anything."

Until that moment when her eyes fell upon him, Sybil had underestimated the anguish of the situation. Her color changed rapidly, her pulses beat excitement. Would he venture to approach her with that sweet dignity of mien to the charm of which she had never been insensible, and hold out his dishonored hand? What was implied—woman-like she asked herself—in the unusual style of his dress? did it mean a tacit abrogation of functions of which he had been proved unworthy?

He was at the farther end of the platform as they stepped upon it, and had all the distance to measure beneath the easy scrutiny of the one woman and the veiled observation of the other: undoubtedly there was a measure of constraint in his manner, and as he came nearer Sybil saw that the large-lidded blue eyes looked darker and heavier, and the slight habitual tension of the level brows was deepened into a fixed contraction. No one looking into his face could fail to see there was the repression of pain in it, but the shamed humility of the criminal was wanting.

He shook hands with Miss Helstone first, who advanced effusively to meet him, anxious to show that there was no change in her feelings towards him. Then he turned to Sybil with a luminous smile that banished all the shadows from his face, and was as far removed from deprecation as possible.

"I knew you would come," he said, "but none the less am I grateful for your coming. I ask nothing more at present."

He did not touch her hand, but his glance conveyed such tender admiration as must be hard, thought Sara, for any girl's heart to resist.

"I will take our tickets for East Molesey," he said, "for the heat in the train will be suffocating, and then we will take the water and row up the river as far as you please."

Sybil so far forgot the situation as to allow her face to brighten at this announcement, but it fell again immediately. She ensconced herself in the remotest corner of the railway-carriage, and looked steadily, with averted head, out of the window. It was a relief to her that Karslake considerately placed himself on the same side, so as to spare her the embarrassment of his regard, and made no attempt to draw her into conversation. But the brief journey soon came to an end, and then, as the three were bound to walk together for a time through the leafy lanes and fields of East Molesey, the restraint that weighed upon them all became more irksome.

"Look here!" said Miss Helstone, suddenly stopping short and facing round on Karslake in her abrupt but friendly fashion, "I know it must be hard work to be talking civil platitudes to me when your mind is full of other things. Put me out of consideration entirely, and fall back on Sybil and have it all out at once. My theory in life is never to carry a burden a step farther than necessary."

"You are very good: I did not quite know that you understood so perfectly the position of affairs," replied he, with a slight inflection of annoyance in his voice, "but what I have to say could scarcely get said between this and the river: it is only a few steps now to the place where we shall find the boat."

He led the way till a turn in the path they were following disclosed the river, winding between its lovely wooded banks. A charming little Thames pleasure-craft, with luxurious cushions and awning, was moored to the willow boughs that drooped over the steps of one of the many little landing-stages of the neighborhood. The man in charge, half asleep in the drowsy sunshine, roused and sprang out as they approached.

"You are not afraid to trust yourself to me, I hope?" said Karslake, smiling as he saw some hesitation on Sara's part. "The river is smooth as glass, we are beyond the swirl of the steamers, and, to add to your confidence, I must tell you that I have pulled an oar on two occasions as one of the 'Varsity eight."

Sybil, who had already sprung into the boat and taken her place with a feeling of perfect security, looked up. He had thrown off his coat and settled to his work, with one easy sweep of the oars propelling the light craft far out into the smooth current. He looked the very prototype of youthful vigor and comeliness; but some subtile and indefinable feeling rendered the very charm of his aspect and his easy conventional manner an offence to her perceptions. He seemed at once to baffle and displease her.

"Spare us," she said, in a low tone, "any further disclosure of your merits: what we know already is as much as we can bear."

She would fain have recalled the words the moment they had passed her lips; she hated herself for having thus spoken; but it was too late. Karslake crimsoned all over face and throat; the very hands that grasped the oars—and she could see how he tightened his hold of them—grew red; but he held his peace. It would have been a relief to her sense of keen compunction had he thrown her an indignant or reproachful glance. But if his face expressed anything, when he was resolutely bent on controlling expression, it was grieved surprise.

"What we know already!" repeated Sara, with rather too obvious an effort to cover the mutual embarrassment: "Sybil's saucy words might stand as the text of our modern speculations; they are the moot question of the day. I have often wished to ask you, Mr. Karslake, what you thought of all this agnostic controversy. I lead a dull life, and read a great deal."

He looked up after a moment, and smiled at the kindly speaker.

"I fear I am not an expert in the tenets of the school, but I suppose it is the inevitable outcome of dogma without faith, and of the fatal tendency to divorce reason from religion. An inflexible belief is perhaps a lost possibility to our age."

"But does not your esteemed Dr. Newman hold an inflexible belief?"

"Who knows? At least he has secured it under the padlock of infallibility."

Sybil scarcely followed what they said: her whole mind was bent upon drawing conclusions from every look, or word, or gesture that escaped him. Was it possible that treachery and imposture could take so consummate and gracious a form? but then again the essence of the charge against him was that his duplicity had been so complete and unsuspected.

"Shall we keep to our original intention and get out here?" he asked, presently: "this is the nearest point to the gardens."

Sara assented, and, as no direct appeal had been made to her opinion, Sybil remained silent. She would willingly have protracted the watercourse indefinitely, dreading the ordeal before her with an intensity of pain and distress that increased as the inevitable moment drew nearer.

However, there was no alternative. Karslake pulled the boat close to the bank and held it firm while she sprang on shore, and then turned to assist Miss Helstone, who performed the feat as ungracefully as do nine women out of ten under the same circumstances. But this arrangement precluded the necessity of Karslake offering her his hand. He moored the boat firm to a post sunk in the bank, and a few minutes more brought them within the royal enclosure.

"It is not a free day for the palace," he said, now directly addressing Sybil, "even if you cared to explore it. There is very little interest inside of it, barring a few insipid portraits, and our object to-day is not to look at pictures. I have a pass for the private gardens if Miss Helstone would prefer them, and for the rest, will you walk with me in another direction? I know the grounds thoroughly, and can find a place where we can talk undisturbed."

Sybil looked at the chestnut-shaded bench on which her friend had taken her seat, having declined the offer of the seclusion of the private gardens and already drawn forth her volume from her pocket, with a strong desire to place herself beside her and postpone the painful interview that impended; but Karslake stood awaiting her instant obedience as it seemed, without the possibility of objection or refusal on her part having occurred to him.

"And how should it occur to him," she asked herself, "when the one object that has brought us together is that I may hear what he has to say to me?"

For all that, she rose slowly and with evident reluctance: so obvious was it that, when they had moved a few paces out of ear-shot, Karslake stopped and said,—

"Are you repenting already that you have consented to meet me to-day? I was more grateful for your goodness than words can express; but some change of feeling on your part seems to have taken place. I do not blame you. Shall I take you back at once to Miss Helstone and say what is necessary by letter? I would rather have spoken, but if it is disagreeable to you—as who can wonder?—my personal wish counts for nothing."

He spoke not only with that silvery clearness of utterance and absolute composure of manner which had often jarred before upon the girl's eager and sensitive nature, but there was an unquestionable restraint and disappointment of tone that seemed to her out of place in their mutual relations.

She lifted up her eyes, alight with indignation and pain.

"Is the matter before us one of choice or inclination?" she asked, "or can you fail to understand how much of personal feeling I must have sacrificed to my sense of what justice to you demanded? It is as much as I can bear to hear you coolly propose delay, as if such a thing were possible in a case like this."

He looked at her earnestly, not so much with tenderness or sympathy as with the long, sustained gaze of one bent on solving a doubtful problem and who accepts the solution at all costs.

"Pardon me," he said, gently; "there shall be no delay; but I find we cannot talk here, every passer-by turns and looks at us. We will go to the private gardens ourselves, where we shall escape the glare of the sunshine."

He turned, and she walked by his side in silence,—walked with a haughty erectness of gait and a hard set expression on her face, of which she was scarcely conscious, but after the long look of searching inquiry he had not glanced at her again.

They passed before the long façade of the quaint old structure, standing out in sharp relief against the radiant azure of the sky, every brick of which seemed to glow and radiate heat in the sultry, oppressive atmosphere. Karslake showed his pass to the lazy official half asleep on his bench beside the entrance-gates, and then they were free of the delicious greenery of those gardens which are perhaps the most charming and complete specimen of the Dutch taste in Europe. He led the way to a certain thick-pleached alley with which he was acquainted, where the light came cooled and softened through branches trained and interlaced for centuries, and the turf beneath their feet was a vivid and elastic carpet, velvet-piled. There, too, was a comfortably cushioned bench, on which he placed Sybil with that sweet and courteous solicitude for her comfort which, though habitual to him, seemed to her now an ironical mockery of the momentous issues between them. He himself declined to sit down.

"The criminal stands before the judge," he said, with a slight smile, "and such it seems are our relations to each other. I own, Sybil, I had no sense of them when I came to meet you to-day, and I see you have missed in my manner the humility and anxiety you expected. Shall I tell you what I expected?"

He took off the soft felt hat he wore and threw it on the ground at his feet, and for a moment passed his hand over his forehead with a gesture difficult to define, but which seemed to indicate a sense of weariness, not so much the outcome of the present moment as of the long experiences of the past.

"I asked you in my note of this morning to come if it were possible: did you think the words meant that, after having heard Mr. Helstone's story, your reception of it would create the difficulty. Ten thousand times no! I expected nothing from you but the more or less indignant repudiation of his slander, and the prompt action of a generous nature to assure me of your unshaken belief in my honor. The only fear in my mind was that he might succeed in coercing your inclination. Now I perceive that I was all wrong—utterly and

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miserably wrong—in those expectations, so much so that nothing occurs to me to say but to ask you what motive induced you to come at all."

"Surely," replied she, in a low agitated tone, for every word that he spoke was an appeal to the chivalry of her nature, "surely you were unreasonable in your expectations? It is not some idle gossip of society which has reached my ears, but the statement of a fact attested by one in whose integrity I have perfect confidence. I am come here, in defiance of his protest, to give you what I think is the right of every man,—the opportunity of clearing your character from injurious charges. I own," she added, with a burning blush, "that my confidence in your being able to do so felt far below your own estimate of what ought to have been my feeling in the matter."

"And suppose," he answered, "I tell you that I deliberately refuse to clear my character from these accusations,—or rather, for I wish to hide nothing, that I am absolutely unable to do so,—what then? Now, as before, when my loyalty and good faith have been under discussion, I have nothing but my bare word to produce for the satisfaction of your doubts. I am constrained to confess that I have no explanation to give of the incident of Saturday; if my silence on the subject is accepted by you as proof of my guilt——"

He stopped abruptly, his eyes dwelling on the fair bowed face and the quivering and contraction of the lines round the lovely, sensitive mouth. An expression of passionate but hopeless yearning gathered slowly into his gaze.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, sadly, "and I am mad to expect that your belief in my rectitude should withstand the weight of Mr. Helstone's evidence. I own I had credited you with a finer gallantry of temper than most women possess: I thought, too, my life would have spoken for me, and you would have recoiled from the suggestion of such absolute baseness. as I should have done had a slur rested on your fair fame."

"The cases are not parallel," was her reply. "I do not know enough of your real life to depend upon its outward testimony, and, as I have said before, this is not a slur,—a breath of opinion. Why do you refuse to take into consideration that this is an accusation based not upon suspicion but *upon facts?*"

He smiled bitterly. "And I will ask you to take into consideration the medium of prejudice and personal enmity through which your eye-witness gazed and beheld these facts. Bear with me a moment if I recall the situation in its simple reality: a woman in sore distress leaning against me for support, and a little child standing by my side and demanding the meaning of his mother's grief. Simply the deductions he drew were false. I find it hard to say even so much as this, but I have nothing further to add to my absolute denial."

Then there was a pause between them. Sybil sat with her arm on the padded elbow of her seat and her averted head bent upon her hand. The situation was exquisitely painful both to her tender maidenly reserve and to her womanly pride; a conflict of feeling stirred within her. While the attraction which Karslake exercised had never been so potent, her spirit of reason and independence rebelled against what seemed to her the almost tyranny of his requirements. Perhaps some subtile magnetism conveyed this impression to his mind, for he broke the silence by saying,—

"You think I ask too much? I ask you, standing to me in the relation of promised wife, to accept implicitly my solemn assurance of unsmirched honor; and if this is more than you can do,—and I know you will speak all the truth about it,—then nothing remains but the rupture of our engagement. Do you remember my once telling you that without you life would not be worth living, and I should have no more zest for duty? Well, I do not say that now, although my love for you has strengthened since then; but the worth of a life, after all, is not to be measured by the happiness enjoyed, and may very well be lived with all the high lights and warm colors washed out of it. I have never felt quite sure of getting you, Sybil, as a man is apt to fear to miss the prize on which he has staked his best. I have loved you, too, in that sort of fashion which does not often meet with adequate response or fulfilment."

"Also in that fashion," she answered, raising a proud, reproachful glance, "which withholds confidence while demanding implicit belief. What proof have I of the strength of a love which is too feeble to break through all this painful mystery and reserve? I must, indeed, be dear to you when you will not forego your pride for my sake, and choose to cast me *off rather than satisfy* my most reasonable requirements!"

"Sybil, my love, my darling!" he said, with an impulsive movement towards her, which he checked, however, almost immediately, "how am I to answer you? My love for you is the one love of my life: you are now, at this moment, as you have been the last three years, the wife of my desire. I have kissed no woman's lips, nay, no woman's hands, but yours: try and believe this, and then ask yourself if it is possible that I could let any mere question of pride or personal injury stand between us? Instead of doubting the reality of my love, consider what must be the stress of circumstance to which I am bound to sacrifice it."

"If it is something so grave and solemn as you imply," she answered, passionately, "it only adds force to my plea that you should trust me with the truth. Do you fear that I am too weak to keep an honorable secret, or to share a burden that you must carry?"

Karslake's resolution must have been superhuman had it not for a moment faltered under the tender pathos of her appeal.

"Is she not right? should I not do well to trust her?" was the prompt temptation that assailed him. There was a brief breathless pause, during which he revolved the question in his mind with a desperate hope that reason or conscience would return a different verdict from before, and Sybil watched the conflict of his mind with an eagerness that checked the beating of her pulses. Then he turned and came close to her, the beauty of his face exalted to a sensible influence by the power of its expression.

"One of us must yield," he said, in a low, passionate tone, "and it must be you, Sybil, for I dare not; nor, on the other hand, will I give you up without a struggle. If I had not fought this battle in advance, you would have conquered me. Understand, my choice lies between honor and dishonor, between love and shame: yours is simply a question of faith, more or less. If you will not deal out the larger measure, I must of necessity let you go: that surrender is just possible to me; but it would be impossible to live under my own contempt or the shadow of your suspicion. Be generous then,—you to whom generosity has been so easy,—and trust me utterly, now and forever!"

He bent towards her suddenly, snatching both her hands in his, and straining his lips upon them.

"God knows," he murmured, "it would be easier to give up life than you? Will you go? surely, surely you must love me a little?"

Sybil looked up, stirred and thrilled with a passionate sympathy unknown to her before. Her eyes swimming with responsive tenderness met his, her light flexible fingers returned the strong pressure of his own.

"Not a little," she answered; "more, I fear, than is either wise or well."

"My darling! my darling!" he whispered; and then he sat down beside her, and for a few moments time ran unmeasured, and care had no existence.

He was the first to arouse himself with a painful sense of a duty half done.

"And when you go back to Burnham Square, how will you satisfy Mr. Helstone's inquiries? Do you quite realize that even to you, my love, my wife, I have no explanation to give,—not a syllable to add to my naked disclaimer? that you yield yourself to me under these hard conditions?"

She looked at him steadily, with a gaze that seemed to reach his soul, but he endured the solemn scrutiny unflinchingly.

"I do," she said. "I believe in you with an inflexible belief; though surely never was a woman's faith so strained before!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MONTH later, Julian Karslake was married to Sybil Dorrimore in the old parish church at Roosden Magna. It was a very quiet wedding; the bride had no crowd of attendant maidens about her, or interested friends watching every manifestation and criticising every arrangement. One carriage took her and her father and the three younger children from Ashlands to the church, which was filled with as many of the rural population of the village as could manage to spare the time, and a few select stragglers whom curiosity had attracted.

She walked very slowly up the aisle, leaning on her father's arm, who was conscious of an unusual sensation of complacency as he looked at the tall slight figure at his side, clothed in gray from hat to heel, and looking lovelier in her quiet pale emotion than he had ever thought her before. But then the aureole of her married dignity was round her head.

The three little children clustered about her, in their simple but pretty attire, as a body-guard, Lucy pressing close against her sister in defiance of all formality, in order not only to fulfil her delicate function of bridesmaid, but to make quite sure that Sybil was not crying; Bertie, who also had his misgivings, fixing Karslake with a round-eyed gaze of half-shy, half-defiant curiosity.

The bridegroom with his imperative friend—a well-bred stranger whom no one knew and every one seemed to ignore—had been waiting at the altar fully twenty minutes before the arrival of the bride, and it was noticed by many with what an expression of intense anxiety he watched her slow progress to his side. But it was also observed that when this position was reached and the eyes of each encountered the other in involuntary greeting, the expression in his face was that of passionate inquiry, and in hers of grave and tender response. She even covertly stretched out her hand towards him, which he clasped and retained unbidden while the old vicar slowly droned through the time-honored service, which surely challenges the revision of this age of reason and culture.

The ceremony over and all formalities duly observed, Sybil had to make her loving adieux to the dear little household band who, in spite of Mr. Dorrimore's impatient reprimands, clung sobbing round her skirts. She herself was not much given to bootless tears, but none the less her pale eloquent face showed how much she suffered, and her last words to her father, before re-entering the carriage which was to take her and her husband at once to the station, were,—

"For my sake be good to them!—don't let them be afraid of you!"

The marriage had been accomplished in spite of the active and persistent opposition of Gilbert Helstone.

Sybil had returned home to Ashlands, with the full permission of her sympathetic hostess, the day following the incidents at Hampton Court. On that occasion she had simply announced to Gilbert her renewed and unshaken belief in her lover, and had refused to listen to protest or expostulation on his part.

He had felt driven to despair by her infatuation; it seemed to him incomprehensible,—a judicial blindness, nay, an almost diabolic prepossession. His first idea had been to go down with her into the country and tell his story to her father, and rouse up what there might be of manhood left in his nature; but he decided it would be in vain.

Mr. Dorrimore believed in his future son-in-law to an extent that would make him impervious to suspicion, much more conviction, and he had a supercilious contempt for Helstone's opinions. To this would be added the potent influences of self-interest, and the force of his daughter's deluded purpose. He would do no good in this direction. But there were other ways: he might investigate the scandal and bring such proofs of Karslake's double-dealing as should convince doubt and credulity, and to this end he must endeavor to trace the woman whom he had seen with him.

During the three weeks that elapsed before the wedding he inserted obscure but catching advertisements, daily, in three of the leading newspapers, varying their character and phraseology with an ingenuity that seemed exhaustless, and spending upon the experiment much more than he was able to afford.

He had observed the details of both appearance and dress in mother and child with instinctive professional acuteness, and indicated his clue in a manner that could not have been missed had the appeals ever come under the eye for which they were intended; but there was no response. The only satisfaction he was able to extract from the proceeding was the idea of the annoyance and anxiety they must excite in Karslake's mind, for there was no doubt of his both seeing and comprehending them.

Indeed, on this point his certainty was confirmed in an unexpected manner: he met Karslake at King's Cross station about a week before his wedding-day, and was surprised to see him approach with the evident intention of speaking. He himself was on the point of turning his back upon him contemptuously, but the thought that he might gather something to help his purpose induced him to alter his mind.

"You have something to say to me?" he asked, with look and accent of studied insult.

Karslake returned the gaze with his usual quiet but complete self-command, which could not, however, conceal the fact that he was looking pale and harassed.

"Yes," he said. "I have a request to make. If you should have any reply to your advertisements, will you inform me of the fact? Not, I need scarcely say, with any view of influencing your action in the matter, but simply that I may know the ground I stand on."

Helstone surveyed him with an expression of contemptuous surprise.

"Do you think me fool enough to stultify the object I have in view? forewarned is forearmed. Come! you have succeeded in doing what I should have said was impossible,—increased my bad opinion of you. Have you turned coward as well as traitor?"

"What I ask," returned Karslake, without the slightest change of manner, "is a bare point of justice, or at least of honor. You are bent on my ruin,—of course with the inflexibility of righteous condemnation. I demand that you do not strike in the dark,—that you give me warning of the steps you may be led to take towards this end."

Helstone's dark face paled with excess of passionate feeling.

"Take the warning on the spot," he answered, harshly: "I shall never give you any other! You have got what you wanted,—the noblest, sweetest creature on God's earth,—and all that now remains for me to do is to try that her eyes may be opened, and to take her from you in the end, though I have failed in the beginning. Am I likely to help you to baffle me?"

He did not consider that he was betraying his own secret, or perhaps he disdained to do so, until he saw that Karslake's face expressed a sort of surprised pity which, in his present mood, irritated him almost to madness.

"For God's sake spare me your damnable sympathy and go, having your answer! At all costs, I count my honest loss better than your shameful gain, and no weakness of compassion towards the woman I love will prevent me from carrying out my purpose. When the time comes, as come it will, I shall choose for her misery rather than disgrace."

He stopped, glanced at his companion keenly, and added, with a sneer,—

"You don't look a very jocund bridegroom: your courage fails: else, why this change of face? Your perjuries of a week or two back could not have lacked unction: why do you come to me now with a tacit admission of your guilt and a squeak for mercy on your lips? It is not quite too late: I will offer you another chance. Give up your claim, even now at the eleventh hour, to Sybil Dorrimore, and I will drop my persecution. Leave her alone, and you may pose to the end of the chapter as saint and angel for what I care. You hesitate? Is it possible?"

"I hesitate as to whether it is worth while to try and disarm your enmity and set your judgment right in this matter, and that not from any personal apprehension but in consideration of your kindness to the Ashlands family. When I saw you last I could not bring myself to deny your infamous conclusions. You know I have done this since, and I will do the same again. Is it quite hopeless that you should be induced to believe I speak the truth?"

He spoke with a natural reluctance, but still without hesitation or slur of word or phrase, and Helstone felt himself baffled by an equanimity that it was out of the power of his outrages to shake. Perhaps it was the sense of this that added a sharper venom to his reply.

"After all," he said, "you lack the spirit of the full villain and have not the courage of your infamy. But reserve your pathos for the pulpit, and your protestations for the woman you have deceived. To cheat me out of the conclusions of my eyesight is hopeless. Good-morning."

He turned on his heel and was going, when a thought struck him.

"I guess there is not much love lost between us, though I give you credit for an amount of self-control no honest man would care to display. Console your hatred with the idea that, in marrying Sybil Dorrimore, you will put an end to a friendship that has been the solace of a hard life before it became a passion and a regret. Don't wonder if I curse the day on which your eyes first fell on her sweet face."

"Will you be leaving the neighborhood?" asked Karslake.

Helstone's eyes sparkled with anger.

"Were you going to suggest a more convenient locality,—a *safer distance from* yourself and her? Too many ties bind me to my present home to make it easy to leave it, and the last will not be the weakest,—the need of keeping up a surveillance over your movements."

Karslake smiled a little contemptuously; an angry rejoinder had risen to his lips, but he checked it, as it almost seemed, in compassion to his companion. Instead he answered,—

"I shall never try to put any pressure upon Sybil's inclinations: if she should still wish to keep up her friendship with you and Miss Helstone she will be free to do so."

"Free to visit at our house without penalty or protest from you?"

"Free absolutely from any restriction on my part."

Helstone looked at him curiously. "In what light am I to view the concession? As a covert bribe to condonation?"

"You are at liberty to view it in whatever light you find most satisfactory: only in giving this permission to my wife it is in the belief that all your instincts of honor and manhood are not buried under your hatred to me." He made a slight gesture of leave-taking, and turned away too quickly to give his companion the chance of reply.

A few days later Gilbert Helstone sat in his chambers with the announcement of the marriage in the "Times" open on the table before his eyes, and, though he uttered no sound nor showed any sign of feeling, the iron of irrevocable disappointment was entering his soul. Had he ever loved her as he loved her at that moment, when nothing was left him but absolute loss and futility? Did the past ever rise before him in reminiscence more cruelly distinct and tender?

He thought of her as the lovely child who had sat on his knee in the old Queen Street nursery; as the growing girl seen, watched, admired from year to year, as the fine possibilities of her nature ripened and developed. Her gallant endurance of the manifold hardships of life, her high-minded indifference to common pleasures, her loving devotion to the interests of her family, the brightness of her spirit, the sweet womanliness of her nature,—he dwelt upon it all as plea and justification of his own idolatry. But a lover, however mature or reasonable, does not dwell alone upon the moral and mental endowments of his queen. To Helstone's inward gaze, Sybil stood before him in all the sweet perfection of her physical beauty. He knew every line of her tall lithe figure, every feature and turn of her face; the sweep of the heavy braids of hair from the delicate straight brows, the habitual look of radiant softness in the large tender eyes, the pale bloom of the clear skin, the warm crimson of the perfect mouth, were as present realities to the keenness of his introspective vision. He recalled the latest expressions he had seen in that vivid countenance; the indignant protest with which she had encountered his accusations, the passionate zeal with which she had afterwards defended her own faith in her lover; the eyes suffused with tender friendship as she had bidden him and Sara farewell at the railway-station; the lingering touch of the small, brown, ungloved fingers.

As he sat with folded arms and lowering brows thinking about it all, he knew that every grace and charm, each endowment and capacity, was henceforth invested with a new potency of allurement,—the mad craving for the unattainable. His love for Sybil Dorrimore had been a holy affection; his passion for Sybil Karslake was an inordinate hunger of the soul. And then his mind slowly and reluctantly took up the idea of the man who was the present and inalienable possessor of all these adorable perfections. There had always been an instinctive antagonism between them, but circumstances had intensified the feeling into a reasoned and deliberate principle. Helstone religiously believed in his own suspicions, and in so doing was justified in the strength of his reprobation and disgust. The known respect, not to say admiration, in which the other was regarded by the world, the charm of his person and manner, the characteristics of his individuality,—in which there was so subtile an attraction that he was not wholly insensible to it himself,—only served to exasperate the sense of his real worthlessness.

He had failed miserably to open Sybil's eyes to the truth: on the contrary, the attempt had stimulated her languid regard by appealing to the chivalry of her nature.

"Poor girl," he thought, with tenderest pity, "not all her gifts of mind and intellect availed to save her from the extremity of feminine infatuation. But when the illumination comes, when it is in my power to put the proofs of her husband's guilt before her, how will her boundless indignation and scorn, and the completeness of her repudiation, avenge that *period of delusion!*"

Well, he would work for this end: to the outside world he was nothing beyond the plodding professional man, making fair headway at the bar by dint of a certain reliable astuteness, but with no aptitude for brilliant successes, no characteristics beyond the most prosaic of his class.

And such, hitherto, he had in fact been; but now, below the surface, lay a fiery impatience of the restrictions of his condition, and a resolute purpose to bend and mould all the circumstances of life to the achievement of Karslake's disgrace and Sybil's enfranchisement.

Therefore in order to attain this end he must renew the attempt to discover the hiding-place of the discarded mistress. It would be strange, with all his acuteness in fullest exercise, if Karslake should succeed in baffling him in the end.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE following six months were spent abroad by the newly-married pair, Sybil seeing as much of Southern Europe as wealth, culture, and devotion could procure. They traversed Italy, explored Switzerland and the Tyrol, wintered in Rome; they visited Greece, and returned slowly home through Germany and France. Their experience of life during that time was as of an enchanted cup held to their lips, brim-full of the essential wine of life.

To the one, to have only witnessed these scenes of matchless interest, of glorious decay and supreme physical beauty, would have been a rapture of satisfaction had she been a poor pilgrim on foot and unaided, but doubtless adventitious circumstances enhanced the charm. If her husband's genius were less and his ardor cooler than her own, his experience and culture were greater; if she could quicken and fire his intelligence by the inspiration of her spirit, he in turn could guide and qualify the swift conclusions of her intellect. If, beneath the transcendent harmonies and soul-stirring benedictions of the Christmas Eve services at St. Peter's, or before the matchless statues and bronzes of the Vatican, or some panorama of snow-capped mountains kissed by the rising sun, he retained his composure while her soul was drunk with excess of passionate rapture, there was no lack of generous and tender comprehension of her keener sensibilities. And then his physical beauty, his sweet and gracious manners (how sweet and gracious towards herself!), and the fine chivalry of thought and principle betrayed in conduct rather than in words, quickened and confirmed the coy and half-reluctant passion he had slowly excited in her mind. In perpetual contact with the seeming purity and simplicity of his nature, the remembrance of the incident that had so troubled their pre-nuptial peace almost faded from her mind, and the constant change, variety, and excitement of their nomad life prevented the touch of weariness or monotony.

But now the end of all this was drawing near. Karslake had stretched his furlough as far as his conscience would allow, and, in spite of Sybil's undisguised reluctance, decided upon going home.

"You forget," he said, smiling, "that I have my work to do."

"And will you be able to give me some work to do? You must always remember I have lived a hard-working life, and shall never take kindly to elegant idleness. I am not quite sure I shall be able to adapt myself to a house like yours, where there is nothing to mend or make, to supplement or desire. I shall need to take surreptitious lessons from my own servants. Do you know I am half afraid I was not meant for luxury and ease?"

"St. Mark's is a large parish," he said; "there are ten thousand human creatures in my so-called cure. Don't you think a large-hearted, gifted girl like you may find some employment for your time among them?"

"Possibly, but I doubt if I shall. If it were a rural Dorset parish I could go in and out of the cottages, teaching a woman here how to make bread, washing and dressing a neglected infant there, and talking to them all the time in their own native dialect; but I am desperately afraid of these Londoners; their training, notions, and aspirations are foreign to all my experiences. And then, Julian, another point it will be well for me to make plain at once. I could not go to any one in the character of clergyman's wife,—I mean in the *sense of being* a teacher of religion. If they were in pain or trouble I could feel with them, but I could not talk to them about another world of which I know nothing, or of God's plans, providences, and requirements, about all which I am equally in the dark. You look grave: you know it is not I that have subscribed the Thirty-nine Articles."

"But you will go to church?" he asked.

"Yes, because it would be an act of discourtesy towards my husband if I did not; but I think I shall ask you to accept it as a proof of my wifely devotion. You know how I have been brought up, how little I have been used to church-going, and, to be quite frank, I feel no sense of deprivation in the past or of gain in the present. Sometimes"—with a radiant smile—"if my mind is very weary, or again if it is very full, say, there is a new poem of Browning's to read or a novel of George Eliot's, I am afraid I shall beg you to let me off."

"But you do not call yourself an unbeliever, Sybil?"

"No. I stand, I think, just outside the pale of religious belief, listening to a voice that may one day speak to my inmost soul, but has not yet spoken. I am in suspense on all points of dogmatic teaching: God has only one aspect to me,—the beneficent Creator of a world of magnificent possibilities of enjoyment, who has also endowed my own being with the capacity of tasting, perhaps of exhausting them. You may not think it, Julian, but mine has been a very happy life."

"It must," he answered, "when you describe existence in such terms as these."

There was a ring of pain in his voice that struck her with a feeling of surprise, but some finer instinct prevented her from expressing her comprehension of it, nor did she give any expression to the thought that rose in her mind that his experience had surely been a happy one too. She did not care to pursue the conversation, having already said enough to satisfy her conscientiousness, but it was a great relief to her mind that Karslake had neither deplored, protested, nor argued.

It was the absence of all ethical exigence on his part, his ungrudging readiness that all those about him should follow their own convictions, while never relaxing the strain of duty for himself, that made him one of the most lovable of comrades, the easiest of household companions. His unconscious unselfishness was a new and delightful study to a girl whose most intimate male connection had been of so different a type, and whose innate enthusiasm for moral excellence fed with healthy delight on these endearing manifestations. Her love for her husband deepened and broadened, leaving no room for the tameness and dissonance he had dreaded.

They had now got back to Bayswater and fallen into the routine of ordinary English life. The best members of a wide district and of several social circles, as followed from his profession, were anxious to become acquainted with them, and she was the most easily pleased and winning of youthful brides. She was prompt to recognize the smallest kindness and to be grateful for it, and her generous estimate of others and many-sided sympathies, not in the least narrowed by her intellectual bias, produced a natural charm and grace of manner which all pronounced irresistible. She could not only endure but disperse the tedium of the morning call, for in her intense vitality there was something that evoked and quickened that of her neighbor; and even the formal dinner-party had points of interest to one to whom as yet there was nothing flat, stale, or unprofitable in life.

In fact, she performed all the ordinary functions of high middle-class society with a completeness and success which could scarcely have been expected from her character and training, or at least only by those who looked very far beneath the surface.

And at the same time, and almost unknown to Karslake, she had made herself acquainted with some of the poorest and most miserable of his parishioners, and had so softened and won them by the freeness of her tender charity that she helped them one step nearer to the conception of the Divine. Karslake, too, soon learned to discuss with her his plans of organization and amelioration on all points of moral or social reform, and to receive help and encouragement from the ardor of her sympathy and the breadth and keenness of her intelligence.

Then there were the old home ties and interests still in unbroken force: the boys had spent half their long vacation at St. Mark's Rectory, and Sybil had been proud and pleased at their improvement both in mind and in manners, putting them through their scholarly paces with unabated zest and capacity, and stimulating their ambition by the greater ardor of her own.

She went back with them to Ashlands for a week's breath of Dorset air and the delight of embracing her little ones and seeing for herself how things worked under the new régime,—the régime being a sensible middle-aged governess for the children and an efficient help for Hannah,—and went back refreshed in spirit, and with a deeper impulse of loving gratitude towards the man to whom all this new comfort and brightness were owed.

In this even flow of tranquillity passed the first year of their marriage, no ominous event of the future casting its shadow before, and the only perceptible difference that time made in Mrs. Karslake's feelings was that, as the novelty and excitement of her new position subsided into custom and routine, the old literary and intellectual instincts stirred within her.

She had always been in the habit of concealing her authorship, and it scarcely glanced across her mind to break through a reserve she felt necessary for success by taking even her husband into her confidence. He was out, as a rule, for several consecutive hours in the day, and two or three of these Sybil devoted to her desk.

Her work was somewhat diversified. She had sent a translation of one or two fragments of the "Prometheus," which had been graciously received by a leading review; she had reviewed a popular novel in one of the weekly papers, with a fine discrimination of judgment and finish of style that had brought her a complimentary invitation from the editor to work on the staff; and, still more, she had published an imaginative sketch in the shape of a short story, in the pages of a Scotch magazine, which by its united strength, delicacy, and originality was attracting general attention and setting eager speculation on foot.

For all these things she was well paid, and this fund she set aside untouched, animated by the proud hope that by the time the boys were ready for college it might be of sufficient amount to help considerably towards their expenses.

For it must not be supposed that because she had consented to the liberal arrangements made by Karslake they ceased to be a burden to her pride and love of independence.

She was content personally to receive what he chose to bestow, but it still seemed distasteful to her that he should be the support of the family at large. Especially she felt the weight of obligation as regarded her brothers. Jack was earnestly bent on winning a scholarship at Winchester, to which she lent all the aid her sympathy could supply; should he succeed, it might then be possible that both should run their University course without an application to her husband's purse.

The incentive was so powerful as to lend a more engrossing fascination to her labor than she had ever known before. She carried it on in her own charming morning-room before a writing-table at once adequate and elegant, and oddly in contrast with the old dilapidated desk of the Ashlands days. Karslake never came into this room without knocking for admission, nor she into his library, for he had a deep-rooted objection, he was wont to say, to the abolition of all courteous reserves in married intercourse. Sybil had none of the tendency to make a litter supposed to be common to a literary woman; the neat manuscript she was engaged on was easily put out of sight in the few seconds before he entered, and he was not one of those men who invariably ask their wives "what they have been doing."

Sometimes indeed there was a certain aspect, a faint carmine tint on the clear pale cheek, and a shining light in the dark eyes, that fixed his attention, but he never associated it with any unknown or concealed employment. He thought the pleasure of his coming had caused it, or perhaps the book she had been reading, for she was always surrounded by books, or the letter he had interrupted, had kindled her sensibility. And as his eyes dwelt upon her he also thought that she grew more beautiful and lovable every day, and he thanked God afresh for his felicity.

CHAPTER XX.

It had been Gilbert Helstone's decision, after a good deal of painful vacillation, to abstain from using the permission he had been granted to maintain his friendship with Mrs. Karslake. His sense of decency prevented him from setting foot in the house of the man he had so grossly, if justly, insulted, and he entertained strong doubts, which events seemed to justify, that Sybil would care to renew their intercourse.

For all that, his patience had been sorely tried by the protracted absence of the married pair. Now and again Sybil had written to Miss Helstone, and, though these letters were chiefly of a narrative or descriptive character, there were slight incidental allusions to her companion that positively thrilled his disordered mind with jealous rage. How absolutely the man had fulfilled his own prophecy that he would make her love him!

It was a slight, though he felt unworthy, vent to his irritation to animadvert on the gross neglect of clerical duty which was involved in this half-year's abandonment of his parish, though Karslake had left an efficient substitute behind him, and to ridicule with the most scathing criticism every individuality of person, manner, or conduct. Some scarcely defined scruple of honor had prevented him from telling Sara in detail the scene he had witnessed at the Crystal Palace: he had contented himself with the assurance that when he condemned her model parson as liar and hypocrite he spoke with sufficient cause, and sooner or later would prove his words.

Miss Helstone did not attach very much importance to these declarations: she looked upon her brother as a freethinker who condemned as impostors all teachers of religion, and was also fully aware of the nature of his own feelings towards Sybil Dorrimore. All this made her tolerant but neglectful of his manifestations. This was so much the case that when they at length returned home Sara made the usual formal call with as little delay as possible, and brought back to her cynical companion the most enthusiastic account of the condition of things all round at St. Mark's Rectory.

"Did Karslake welcome you with effusion?" he asked. "If you had taken the trouble to consult me, I should have told you not to go."

"I thought it likely, and avoided the collision. As for Mr. Karslake, he never is effusive, and no doubt he resented your absence."

"He would be quite prepared for that, Sara. My good girl, you must promise me not to go again."

Helstone's voice as he spoke took its rarely tender tone; his sister looked at him anxiously.

"Not go again because of your unreasonable prejudices, Gilbert? Do you consider they are almost the only people I care to meet, and that I love the girl as if she were a younger and nobler sister?"

"Sybil must come and see us here," he said, in a low tone, and without looking at her; "but you cannot visit at the house of a man of whom I entertain such an opinion as I do of Julian Karslake, and have moreover insulted to his face. I am very sorry, but it cannot be helped."

He got up and left the room,—his way of closing a discussion.

Sara sulked, rebelled a little, and finally yielded, contenting herself with the mild revenge of constant attendance upon the frequent services at St. Mark's, which she knew tried her brother severely, though on this point he did not interfere.

The constitutional perversity of her temper, added to a conviction of the inexpediency of bringing Mrs. Karslake into intercourse with Gilbert, influenced her so far that she made no attempt to induce Sybil to visit her for the first few months after her return; but as time passed on the desire to renew the old friendship and confidence grew too strong for her objections, and she wrote her a long explanatory letter, which ended by entreating her to come and see her sometimes, in spite of Helstone's unjust prejudices.

This letter Sybil, having read and pondered over it, took to her husband. She went direct to the library, believing him to be there, but, receiving no answer to her summons, opened the door.

To her startled surprise she perceived that the room was not empty, as she had expected, but that Karslake was sitting before his writing-table with his head buried in his hands, in the attitude of a man lost in profound and painful rumination. She observed, too, in the first anxious survey that there was no evidence about him of any immediate employment,—books and papers having been swept apparently on one side.

At the opening of the door, however, he looked up; but even when he saw who it was there was an absence of the usual brightening of expression.

He rose at once, and drew a chair for her nearer the fire.

"I need not say I did not hear you," he said, and then he continued to stand opposite to her, leaning against the high mantel with his face somewhat averted, and again relapsed into silence.

Sybil sat down in the seat indicated and made some casual remark. That there was something wrong, in all the vague amplitude of the phrase, she felt certain. His face was very pale beyond its habitual lack of color, and there was a fixed contraction of the brows, and a hardness altogether unknown to her observation before in the lines of the mouth. Moreover, she perceived that his trouble or preoccupation was so great that he found it difficult, or perhaps impossible, to rally that power of self-collectedness which so seldom deserted him.

It followed inevitably that her mind should recur to the painful incidents which had preceded their marriage, and to which the slightest allusion had never since been made, and that the recollection should excite an involuntary spasm of pain. Moreover, it made the task of introducing Sara's letter more difficult: her name would be a link of association with this hateful mystery.

To have asked him point-blank, as some women might have done, what was the matter, would have been impossible to Sybil's sensitive delicacy. She got up and went to his side: in that position he was not exposed to the embarrassment of her full gaze.

"I am afraid I have interrupted Sunday's sermon," she said, in her low vibrating voice, which seemed to give eloquence to her most careless words, "for you have all the writer's look of preoccupation. I don't wonder you did not hear me, I knocked so softly."

For answer he stooped down and kissed her hand, not with the tender passion of a lover or husband, but with an unmistakable movement of grateful thanks.

Then she looked up into his face and saw there an intensity of distress and pain greater than she had estimated at first, greater than it was possible for her love to ignore. As they stood thus side by side, her graceful head touched his shoulder; she turned round, and, clasping her slender hands about his neck, looked earnestly into his face.

"Can I help you in any way?—by speech or action, I mean? If you can tell me what is the matter, I am here to listen: otherwise you are free not to speak. I mean, it will cause no soreness, no mistrust, in my mind."

He drew a breath of intense relief; his brow cleared, and the usual expression of sweetness came back to his face. He bent towards her and kissed her sweet lips, but without the suggestion of strained feeling he had shown before.

"You have helped me already to the uttermost; there are few women capable of your magnanimity, Sybil: trust me, I will never prove unworthy of it."

"I do trust you," she answered, in a low tone, and then there was a pause between them. He held her hand still clasped in his, but it was evident he was not going to confide in her, and she felt a sharp pang of cruel disappointment.

In her anxiety to conceal this fact she reverted somewhat abruptly to Sara's letter.

"I should like to read it to you," she said. "I do not quite know what answer to make."

Having fulfilled her task and shown a great deal of unconscious zest and fellow-feeling with the writer in so doing, she looked anxiously towards Karslake, who had now recovered his usual equanimity and had listened with quiet attention to the recital. He could not fail to see which way her wishes inclined, and the strong natural reluctance he had been on the point of expressing he decided to conceal.

"Go and see her, my darling, by all means,—it will be an act of charity and friendship combined,—and tell her what a warm sense I entertain of the old kindness she showed me. It is not my fault I do not call and thank her in person."

"Is there no hope, Julian, of the misunderstanding between you and Gilbert Helstone being arranged? He was such a generous friend to us all when we had no other."

"Sybil," he answered, with a grave smile, "I scarcely think I shall *find it possible* for my wife to reconcile friendship of him with loyalty to me, though I am very sorry to say this. But if you think otherwise——"

"I own," she replied, eagerly, "that the strength of my indignation against him has been greatly lessened by the experiences of the past year. He has not spoiled our happiness; he has forced it to a higher level. Is not my belief in you at this moment implicit? and what then does it matter that he tried and failed to shake it? Then I have so many dear memories connected with the old home, in all which he seems to have had a share, that I do not like to give him up; and very likely he has abandoned long before this the injurious suspicions he entertained at one time respecting you, Julian."

Her voice fell and her color rose a little as she spoke.

"No, he has not abandoned them," replied Karslake, quietly; "but you are right in thinking his devotion to your family outweighs his enmity to me: from the virtue springs the vice. Do exactly as you wish, Sybil, not only in respect to Miss Helstone but her brother."

The girl's beautiful face glowed and brightened; it was one of her strongest desires to see Gilbert Helstone and overwhelm his prejudice by proofs of her husband's merits.

"I will take you at your word, and go and see Miss Helstone after luncheon; and now"—more seriously—"I will leave you alone."

She looked at him anxiously, half expecting and wholly hoping he would seek to detain her, but he did not. He opened the door for her departure and closed it slowly after her, and then as slowly walked back to the seat he had occupied before she interrupted him, and bowed his face once more upon his hands.

He sat as motionless as if he had been turned to stone; there was no trembling of the strongly interlaced fingers, no groan or sigh to testify to the severity of the inward conflict. After a time he roused himself, and, taking two letters out of his pocket, prepared to re-read them, perhaps for the third or fourth time that morning.

The first was a daintily-tinted but ill-written note in a woman's handwriting, and ran thus:

"I must see you to know what I am to do. My darling *is dying,* and he is come back, and I am more than miserable."

The other was a man's letter, and the writer was Gilbert Helstone. This was the wording of it:

"I am on your track at last and see my triumph close at hand. Take notice, I am better than my word, and give you the warning I refused."

The bell rang for luncheon; Karslake refolded the letters, and, rising wearily from his seat, approached the hearth and dropped them both into the glowing heart of the fire. He stood for a few moments watching them consume and trying to rally his courage and composure, and then as a test of his success went into the dining-room, and ate his luncheon in so much his accustomed manner that even Sybil's tender penetration was at fault.

As they rose from table she said,—

"I am now going to Gilbert Helstone's, but I am not wilfully bent upon doing so. One lightest word from you, Julian, and I will give up the idea."

He then went up to her and kissed her with a grave tenderness.

"Go, by all means, my dear. If I should not be at home when you return, do not wait dinner. I am obliged to go out on business."

"On business," she replied, "beyond our late dinner-hour."

"Perhaps I ought to have said on duty. I am going to visit a sick child, and at a long distance from here."

"So be it," she answered; "then I can sit and gossip with Sara Helstone without compunction," and so they parted.

CHAPTER XXI.

A sick child,—is there anything on earth more pathetic? —the heaviest burden and sorest penalty imposed on the infant pilgrim in the rough road of humanity.

It is nine o'clock at night, and the late October rain is falling in torrents. In a small house in one of the most remote of the eastern suburbs, this common tragedy was being enacted. The child was lying in bed in an upper room simply *or rather meagrely* furnished; the disease was typhoid fever, but the stages of heat and frenzy had been passed, and he was now exhausted and comatose, and unconscious of all surroundings. The soft moulded limbs have lost their roundness, and the face, touched and marred by the foul fingers of disease, much of its seraphic beauty, but to those who knew him it would still not be difficult to recognize him by the cloud of golden hair shed over the pillow, the large-lidded eyes and contour of delicate perfection.

A shaded lamp burns on a distant table and throws heavy shadows around it. The neglected fire in the untended grate is burning out to its last embers, for the woman who is kneeling by the bedside has lost all interest in external comfort. She has knelt there hour after hour, her elbows on the couch, her chin supported on her hands, and her distended gaze fixed unweariedly on the boy. If you watch her you will see how her whole being is absorbed in her pitiful contemplation, for she reproduces as if instinctively every slight movement on the part of the child; her dress and appearance show those signs of disorder and negligence which suggest the idea of having watched day and night—perhaps days and nights—by the sick bed; but, weary and worn as she is, she is still very pretty, with a soft childlike loveliness that possibly has gained interest and expression from the intensity of her present suffering.

Mother and child are not the only occupants of the room: on the farther side of the bed, almost beyond the range of light, a man is seated in a comfortable American rocking-chair, smoking a delicate cigar with apparent insensibility, and with a tumbler of brandy and soda conveniently placed on a small table at his elbow.

It is curious to observe how entirely alien and aloof the two groups appear from each other: her senses perceive nothing but the child, his seem concentrated on the coarse physical sensations of his employment. He is so placed that the bed escapes the fumes of the tobacco, and, as he reclines at his ease lazily watching the thin cloud he expels from his well-formed lips, it might be supposed he has no interest or anxiety beyond.

But the conclusion would be wrong: in his turn he has watched the child till his poor powers of endurance are exhausted; she can still kneel and agonize till the end; the strain of the masculine mind must be relieved, and this is the only relief that suggests itself to him. Besides, it assists concentration of thought, and he has a great deal to think of.

The silence is so profound, except as broken by the heavy breathing of the boy, that the sound of the door-bell, though evidently rung by a guarded hand, startles them like an electric shock.

Then the woman, who has turned perceptibly paler, looks across the bed at her companion.

"It is Julian," she says in a low, nervous manner. "I have sent for him. I did not know what else to do."

He sprang up from his seat with a coarse oath upon his lips, flung his half-finished cigar under the grate, and seemed to hesitate about treating the contents of his glass in the same way, but on second thoughts he changed his mind and drained it to the bottom.

The next moment Julian Karslake entered the room: he took in the scene at a glance,—the peril of the prostrate child, the despair of the mother, the incongruous, defiant bearing of the man.

For a moment the two stood on either side of the bed gazing at each other, in height, feature, and general physique so singularly alike that the most casual observer must have pronounced them brothers. But how much of dissonance is compatible with likeness! The one looked as if the beauty of the inward nature had moulded into affinity the outward aspect; the other, as if the reckless and sensual soul was gradually degrading and blotting out the lines of physical perfection.

"Why are you here?" asked the elder, sternly: "if your own promises do not bind you, have you lost sight of the risk you run?"

"I run!" repeated the other, with a sneer: "*you* run, rather! It is self-interest makes you so keen a watch-dog, good Julian, but there is a specific against misery even in misery itself. For my part, I defy the law to condemn me to a more wretched life than I lead, while exposure to you would be as bad as the felon's dock or a cell at Millbank. Why am I here? Look at the poor little chap on the bed, and answer that question for yourself."

"The excuse would be sufficient,—only you did not know he *was ill.*"

"Then, hang it, I came to see my girl, and, by God, not even you shall come between us. Had it not been for this," —pointing to the bed,—"you would not have caught me off my parole or she here. Your saved Magdalen was going back to her sins."

"Is this true?" said Karslake, looking down at the kneeling figure at his feet. The girl winced and shrank beneath the compassion of his tone as if a blow had struck her.

"He has been here since yesterday," she muttered, "but I have scarcely looked at him or moved from Harry's side. I did not know he was coming, nor why he came. I told you as soon as I could; what does it matter now? If Harry dies I shall have no heart to be good!"

Her voice rose in a wail of anguish; she suddenly flung her arms round Karslake's knees.

"Pray to God for me," she sobbed; "He will not listen to me. If you want to save me, save him! Is heaven so hard upon me because I have no right to be a mother?"

In a moment the younger brother had cleared the space between them, and, tearing her from her knees by an exercise of muscular strength, he caught her in his arms and strained her against his breast, soothing her and kissing her wet cheeks with passionate abandonment.

"My poor Nell, my precious girl!" he said, "has he brought you to this state of slavish terror? God! if there be a God, who is dearer to Him, think you,—he in his prosperous, cold-blooded formality, or you, sweet broken-hearted darling? Come what may, my girl, we have met and parted for the last time now."

At first she had struggled to free herself from his embrace, more from the sense of Julian's presence than from any inward reluctance; but, as the familiar tones and tender caresses stirred the chords of old associations, she grew passive and offered no further resistance. Her weary golden head, heavy with pain and sorrow, rested on his breast with a sense of habitude and languid pleasure: for a few moments she forgot her child.

Karslake watched them both with sensations of mingled pain and sympathy, but he abstained from interference till the first burst of passionate feeling was over. Then he went up to his brother and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"Harry," he said, "there is but one way of righting this wrong: will you do it?"

The other suddenly released his hold of Nell, as if the suggestion unnerved him: he looked up with his flushed face blanched with fear.

"What do you mean? Have I not proved to you again and again the thing is impossible, absolutely more impossible than in the times gone by?"

"In the times gone by you based your objections on the plea that it would be below your social standing to marry the woman you had dishonored; now you have lost that standing by an act of fraud that has, to my mind, not more moral evil in it than much that you have done before, and through it all Nell continues to love you. Reward her fidelity by making her your wife, and she will not refuse to share your exile. Accept the one point of reparation in your power."

"Accept my ruin! You mean I should marry her in my own name in the light of day? In other words, you would give me up to justice, and so end the tax on your purse and your patience? You think you could face the world as a convict's brother? Not you! nor would Nell have much to thank me for if at this time of day I made an honest woman of her in such a doubtful fashion. No, no, Julian, you salve your clerical conscience by offering a suggestion you know I shall refuse, and which otherwise you would never propose. It is scarcely worth while: we shall stick as close to each other as if your precious palaver had been spoken over our heads."

"I am quite prepared," replied Karslake, quietly, "to take my share of the risk and to smooth your way so far as it is in my power. You might meet at Bristol,—it is easy to hide among the teeming masses of a seaport town,—and go straight from the church to the first vessel bound for the antipodes. I will secure your berths and find all necessary funds."

Harry burst into a coarse laugh. "Are you, after all, in earnest in making such a proposal, or is it a trap to catch me unawares? Have you never heard of an extradition warrant? What! my own name on the marriage license and parish register! Shall I send my photo to Scotland Yard, and detail my *dress, appearance,* and contingent whereabouts in the 'Hue and Cry'? By God, Julian, parsons are the weakest fools on the face of the earth! for the sake of a contemptible social scruple to risk my liberty like that!"

"So weak a fool am I," replied his brother, "that I have reached the conclusion that the only right thing to do is to drop this miserable concealment, declare that you are still a living man, and take all the consequences of the confession. It may be the man you have wronged, or even the law itself, would deal leniently with you; but otherwise I would rather face life as a convict than live under such conditions as yours,—and mine," he added, in a lower tone.

The other looked at him in speechless rage.

"You would betray me?" he asked, in a suppressed choking voice, and making a menacing movement towards him.

"I shall never betray you, but if you decide to reject these terms you must at least keep those already made. You risk too much all round by coming here, besides destroying Nell's peace of mind. Also, except as your wife, she goes not with you. I will not ask you to go away to-night, while your boy is hanging between life and death, but you must leave this house: we will watch and let you know when the crisis is over. There is a little inn a stone's throw from here where you can sleep. I suppose you have some sort of disguise?"

Harry's lowering brow cleared a little.

"You mean straight and fair? You will not fail me? You have money with you?"

Karslake nodded assent: words were harder to produce.

Nell, meanwhile, had relapsed into her former mood, and was again kneeling beside the bed with her eyes fixed on the pallid, changeless face of the unconscious child. Julian went to the other side, and, stooping over him, took the tiny hand tenderly in his, in order to test the fluctuating feeble pulse, as well as to close a useless controversy.

Again at this moment the door-bell rang.

Nell looked up in alarm. "It is the doctor! Harry, there is time to hide: that door leads into my dressing-room."

Julian had turned quickly as the street-door was opened, and the voice of the childish maid-servant could be heard distinctly in parley with the visitor: he put gently down the frail hand he held, but his own shook perceptibly.

He had recognized the voice as Gilbert Helstone's. It was one of the crises of life; his own honor or his brother's safety hung in the balance.

One keen glance in Harry Karslake's face would have solved the mystery of the Crystal Palace, and wiped the infamous conclusions out. Two strides would have brought him within the shelter of the dressing-room, or otherwise he might have barred his brother's retreat; and the risk incurred by the latter was less than the certainty of his own injury and wrong.

But there was not the vacillation of a moment: to say that the idea of self-preservation did not occur to his mind would be false, but it occurred only to be instantaneously rejected.

He stepped forward and opened the door behind him for Harry's hurried concealment, and closed it noiselessly again.

Then Nell spoke. "You will not leave me! you will wait and hear what the doctor says? Or perhaps I ask too much?"

"It is not the doctor," he said, gently, "or, if it is, he is not alone. I recognize the voice of a man I know who has business with me and, I suppose, has followed me here."

He hesitated, scarcely knowing what step to take or suggest. Was he tamely to submit to the insufferable outrage of Helstone's espionage? And yet of what avail would protest or controversy be when his lips were sealed to silence, even had such resource been possible under existing circumstances?

It was now evident from the sound of voices below that Helstone was not alone: he had probably entered the house with the doctor, who was questioning the servant-girl as to whether he should go up to the sick-room at once. Nell sprang to the head of the stairs and begged him to do so, and the next moment both he and the stranger entered the room together.

So great was the poor mother's preoccupation that she scarcely heeded the intrusion, or accepted Julian's explanation as sufficient: he on his part raised his eyes and met Helstone's insolent, defiant glance with dauntless equanimity. There was no opportunity for the exchange of words; Karslake was standing on the farther side of the bed, which the doctor had immediately approached in order to examine his patient; Nell awaiting his fiat with her eager gaze fixed on his face, and her whole soul in her gaze. But the mind of the professional man himself was alert and open: though his first keen glance was at the child, his next was at the stranger, whose striking personality challenged attention. It was the first time in his visits to mother and son that he had seen any man about the house, and his curiosity had been considerably excited as to the status of his clients: the rapid conclusion he now reached as his eyes searched Karslake's face was a very satisfactory one to the doubts he had entertained.

"Your husband, I presume, my dear madam?" he said, acknowledging Karslake's courteous recognition of his approach.

Poor Nell's face and neck were dyed crimson with complex confusion and shame: she cast an agonized glance of deprecation towards Julian, to whose pale cheek also the color slowly rose. He knew Helstone's cruel cynical eyes were watching every manifestation and translating each into damning evidence against him.

For all that, neither gesture nor voice betrayed the slightest agitation. He replied, quietly,—

"You are mistaken, but none the less I am deeply interested in your patient. What do you think of him? I have thought his sleep more natural during the last quarter of an hour, and there is a little moisture on the skin."

The doctor shrugged his shoulders almost imperceptibly; he concluded he understood the situation perfectly, and was a little revolted by the coolness of the speaker: besides, he resented instinctively any unprofessional opinion of the case. He began feeling the child's pulse, testing the temperature, and then raised the heavy lids and peered into the dilated pupils beneath. At the end of his investigation he shook his head ominously.

"Surely you find some hopeful symptoms?" urged Karslake, in the same tone of anxiety as before, and trying to direct the doctor's attention to the white face of the stricken mother at his side. "I have seen patients rally from a state of coma as profound as this, and begin to revive."

"It is possible,—just possible," was the reply, "but the boy appears to me to have been a little neglected: to be sure, my dear madam, you could not know what to do in these changed conditions. Everything now depends on the nursing he gets:

he must be watched hour by hour, and every symptom observed and provided for. Tired eyes and weary limbs won't do: you must go to bed and find some one else to sit up;" he looked at Karslake a little maliciously. "His lips must be moistened continually with wine and water or milk, if you have got any. I will send a draught that must be administered in case of returning consciousness,—that is, if he is able to swallow."

Then Helstone spoke from the remote corner of the room, where he had been standing a silent spectator of the scene.

"It will, no doubt, be a great disappointment to Mr. Karslake that his engagements will make it impossible for him to spend the night with the child, in spite of his natural desire to do so."

The unfamiliar name fell flat on the doctor's ear, and he made no sign. It could not be otherwise than that Julian understood the animus of the speaker, but no change of expression bore witness to the fact.

"It will be inconvenient for me to sit up all night," he said, addressing the doctor, "but not impossible. It is necessary that the mother should rest, and there is no one else to take her place. But in that case I must find a messenger to deliver a note at my own house."

"I am going home immediately," said Helstone, "and must of necessity pass your door. I will deliver a letter if you think me sufficiently trustworthy."

There was a ring of almost diabolic triumph in his voice, and for the first time Karslake turned and looked at him with an expression that indicated something of the moral recoil he excited. He did not, however, refuse the offer.

"If you will come down-stairs into another room we can perhaps arrange it." And then he turned to Nell to make some inquiries about writing-materials, speaking to her in his usual tone of gentle consideration, to which his present sympathy gave an added touch of tenderness and respect.

She, poor soul, to whom he had always appeared as an angel of God, looked up to him with eyes so full of passionate feeling that Helstone might well be excused for thinking the last point of confirmation had been added to his conclusions. He preceded Karslake down-stairs, with such a tempest of rage and hatred in his heart that he half doubted his power to hold it within decent control.

Here was evidence sufficient for the Divorce Court,—evidence that must rouse the meekest and most credulous of wives into relentless revolt. Sybil, the barely year-old wife, already wearied of and betrayed, while the husband returned to his earlier and baser passion.

He had not himself expected anything so bad as this: he had indeed firmly believed in the guilt and dishonor of the past, but had supposed that marriage would have put an end to it. Even the easy morals of society would have exacted this as an indispensable point of decency; but the effrontery of the priest's transgression mocked at even conventional limits. Then his mind dwelt on his own strong love for the wronged and outraged girl; how the lightest touch of her hand on his, still more the tender kiss of friendship she had sometimes given in the sweet past, made every pulse in his being thrill with the agony of vain desire. She had given herself body and soul to this man, with the most insane but generous confidence,—and this was her reward!

And—the pity of it! the pity of it!—not two hours before he had seen her dear face kindle, had heard her tender voice take a sweeter inflection, as she described and eulogized the daily life and character of the husband who was at that very moment renewing his vows to his mistress and soothing her maternal grief.

The little parlor down-stairs had no fire, and was only lighted by the candle Karslake had brought down in his hand. He placed it on a table, found pen and ink as if familiar with the arrangements of the place, and sat down to write his letter without word or look towards his companion.

Helstone had closed the door and stood glaring at him with his back against it. It was not his intention, if he had sufficient restraint over himself, to vent his wrath and disgust in speech: he could afford to wait now that he saw his way to his perfect revenge. He watched him, as he wrote, with venomous intensity: as the sickly ray of the candle fell direct on his enemy's face he saw with a thrill of triumph its extreme pallor, and that the hand that dipped into the ink shook perceptibly. He could hardly refrain from tearing the paper from under his fingers and refusing to be the medium of conveying his words of falsehood and cajolery to the unhappy and deceived wife at home: only his success would be all the more complete if he could abstain from violence or threatening now. Some slight contemptuous surprise he felt at Karslake's invincible firmness and composure under the knowledge of his own complete exposure, of the scathing reprobation excited and the consequences that must ensue. But that reserve of outward manifestation was one of his most baffling characteristics; and it was precisely to such consummate aptitude for deception that Sybil owed her ruin and his hate its keenest edge.

The note was brief and penned rapidly after the first pause of deliberation; then Karslake sealed the envelope in which he had placed it and rose from the table.

"Before putting this letter in your hands," he said, "you will not think it unreasonable that I ask for an assurance that you will simply deliver it at the door. I mean, that you will make no attempt to see Mrs. Karslake."

"I shall make no attempt to see Mrs. Karslake to-night. It would be too late. My compact goes no further."

"In that case I will light you to the door. I am anxious to return to the sick-room, and I imagine your object is gained."

"Ay, beyond my most sanguine expectation! But I will dispense with ceremony. I prefer to let myself out with my own hand. You will scarcely expect me to say good-night: there is not a curse in the repertory of the blasphemer that I would not rather invoke on your head."

And with these words he opened the door, groped his way along the dark passage, and let himself out into the still falling rain.

Karslake stood for a few moments after he had heard the door close behind him, poured out and drank a glass of water from a bottle that stood on the table near him, and then slowly took his way up-stairs again.

CHAPTER XXII.

The first thing Karslake did on returning to the room, after the departure of the doctor, was to organize arrangements for the night, and make some change in the pillows and position of the still unconscious child, for Nell, though a devoted mother, was a bad nurse. Then he dismissed the exhausted girl to bed, advising her to take the servant into her apartment with her for further precaution.

"I will see Harry safely off the premises," he said, "and you may depend upon my calling you if any change for the worse should occur in the child."

"But the doctor's boy has not brought the medicine yet," she answered, fretfully: "the maid or I must sit up for that."

"There is no need. I will open the door myself and then shut up the house." Seeing she still hesitated, he added,—

"Are you afraid I shall not understand the directions on the bottle?"

"Oh, no, not that; but lest you should do yourself still more harm."

"That will not follow," he said, kindly. He did not add, "because all the harm possible has been already done," though that was his inward comment. "Try and dismiss all your anxieties and sleep soundly, so as to be fit for the work of to-morrow. I hope and believe he will rally, but he will need a good deal of patient nursing, and you must not wear out your strength."

She went at last, and then, after having surveyed his little patient and wetted the parched lips according to instruction, he opened the door of the inner room, where his brother lay concealed, and went in.

There was a couch in one corner of the apartment, and on this Harry Karslake had flung himself, and was at the moment lying fast asleep. The light from the adjoining room was just enough to reveal the attitude of careless ease, the quiet, untroubled slumber he was enjoying, and, as is often the case, his face under this aspect seemed to have recovered much of the innocent repose of youth.

The elder brother leaned against the wall and looked down upon him; then, moved by that instinct of protection which had always marked their relations, he took up a woollen shawl that was thrown over the back of the sofa and spread it over him. Light as the touch was, it was sufficient to awake him: he sprang up with an anxious and aggressive air.

"Oh, is it you, old fellow?" he said, testily. "Come to tell me it is time to be moving? A hunted man sleeps like a hare. Hang it, Julian, there are days and hours when I am half disposed to take your advice, throw up the sponge, and give in. Five years of pious propriety would see me out of Dartmoor with a ticket-of-leave; then Nell and I could be spliced without further bother, if she had proved faithful, and we would hide our disgrace in one of the cities of Australia. If the little chap lives he should go with us. What do you say?"

"As I have said before; that it is the only way back to peace and honor, if you have courage enough to pay the penalty."

The words were spoken almost mechanically, and the other looked in his face and uttered a low mocking laugh.

"I am scarcely the dupe you take me for," he said: "if you really thought I spoke in good faith your shame and terror would be tenfold mine. You would urge me *for our mother's sake* to save the name you bear from public disgrace, and double your bribes for my expatriation. Own it! You have married lately: was that an honorable thing to do?"

"It would have been a dastardly thing to do if I had known you were alive and a criminal when I first sought to win my wife. I learned the former fact from Nell Trevelyan a month before my marriage, and the latter not till my return from my wedding-tour. From that hour to this I have incessantly revolved in my mind the right course to pursue. I am pledged at all points not to betray you; but decide to surrender yourself to justice, and you may count upon me to back you at all costs."

"To stand in the dock at my side at the Central Crim.," sneered Harry, "and subsequently to face your church and fine wife in the new character of convict's brother? You, whose whole life—come, I'll allow that much—has been given to the pursuit of whatsoever things are lovely and of good report, to be flung so deep into the mire? No, no, Julian; you are a very good fellow in your little way, but, take my word for it, you are not quite tough enough for that."

"Try me!" was the almost passionate answer. "Give me leave to go to Mr. Anstruther and tell him you are the one survivor of the wrecked fishing-smack in which you made your escape, and that you choose to stand the penalty of a half-involuntary crime rather than to spend life in vagabondage and exile. It is possible that time has softened his enmity; I would offer him restitution to the farthest claim of principal and interest, and if not——"

"Ay, there comes the pinch! I own my heart leaps at the chance of being a free man once more. How I curse the moment when I was fool enough to add that little naught to his niggardly cheque! seems to me now that the incarnate devil himself would not tempt me to such idiot folly again. A stroke of the pen—the impulse of half a moment—to wreck a man's whole life! But I know Mr. Anstruther; there is the venom of the Scotch trader in his blood, and he has hated me like poison from a child. No, Julian, no; I'll not risk it: nothing would induce him to forego his pound of flesh. They might give me twenty years."

Karslake was silent.

"I must be off," resumed the other. "I shall find my way down to the docks in the morning, and book myself as an A.B. in the first ship chartered for the antipodes. So I found my way home: even Nell's faithful memory did not penetrate my disguise at first. I suppose, cowed by your croaking, there is small chance of her joining me, should I send for her in time to come? And now to business: are you prepared to bleed freely?"

"I have two hundred pounds with me: when you reach your destination write, and if possible I will arrange the transmission of periodical sums. But you will work?"

"As an alternative to starving I will work, not otherwise; but what you propose can't be done. Fate makes me a vagabond; but I will let you know, depend upon it, when and how money can reach me."

He took and secured the leathern purse his brother held out to him, and then stooped and lifted a heavy carpet-bag that was pushed out of sight under the couch.

"This is my toggery of transfiguration," he said, with forced gayety; "but I will put it on down-stairs before the little glass in the parlor. I would rather you did not see me in it: at some future time it might put your truth-speaking to an awkward test. You will bid her good-by for me?"

"I will; but wait a moment! It is almost more than I can bear to see you relegate yourself to a life of hardship and wretchedness. Is there no other alternative possible?"

"None; as a man sows, etc. The parting is a pinch,—to you,—but you will soon get over it. And, to help to harden your heart, remember the life I led you in the days of old; how I ridiculed your affection, mocked your advice, and aggravated my sins out of very wantonness, to give you pain. Look at the sequel as the whipping I have richly deserved, and—good-by."

"What I remember," said Karslake, retaining his hand in an almost painful grasp, "is the innocent curly-headed child who lay sobbing in our dying mother's arms, and the promise she extracted from me then,—'to strive for your welfare at any personal cost.' How miserably have I failed in its fulfilment!"

"Not entirely your own fault, my good Julian! My bias, unfortunately, seems to have been the same as the Psalmist's: 'I went astray from the womb speaking lies.' I don't think I was ever an innocent child; I told fibs, and prigged the sugar and jam, long before the period you mention, though the dear guileless creature never suspected it. And for a while I hoodwinked my big brother too. But it is time to have done with these reminiscences:—only you have recalled the old pledge given on a death-bed,—you will never forget it?"

"So far as the memory of it can help you, I will never forget it."

"You are very fond of your wife, Nell tells me; also that she is wonderfully pretty. There are moments of conjugal lapse and softness when a man lets his very soul leak out its secrets. You will be on your guard against such? You will never own your brother is a living man?—renew your promise!"

"I promise."

"'At any personal cost,' the dear mother said," continued the younger man, bitterly; "and I have cost you something already. *None the less,* you have all the good things of life in possession, and the darling is the outcast! There is precious little you can do for me now. Still, my mind would be easier if you would clinch your naked promise with an oath."

"My word binds me for life or death," answered Julian: "you need no other security." Then, looking again into the sullen, dissatisfied face of the other, he added, "As you will: dictate what words you please, short of impiety, and I will repeat them after you."

A twinge of compunction pierced the callous sensibilities of Harry Karslake as he encountered his brother's glance.

"Let it pass!" he said, impatiently: "you would cavil at my prescription for certain. Only remember, I hold you bound in tighter bonds than if you had called down hell and damnation upon your head."

He turned abruptly from him, and, going into the other room, stood for a moment by the bed and looked at the child.

Julian followed him, full of anxiety for his involuntary neglect, but there was no change to be perceived.

"I wonder if this youngster and I will ever see each other again!" muttered Harry. "Not much matter if we don't. Mind, I leave him to you as my representative of virtue and honor:—make a better man of him than his father! I would kiss him, but he smells of fever. No more farewells! I'm off—don't follow me!"

He went down-stairs, and Julian heard him shut and lock the parlor door upon himself; in less than ten minutes' time it was reopened, and the wanderer let himself out into the darkness of night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

It was ten o'clock in the morning of the following day. Mrs. Karslake, who retained her country taste for early rising, had already breakfasted and dismissed her light household duties. The persistent rain was still falling so that she could not go out; her husband had not yet returned, and this would give her a longer spell of leisure than usual over her beloved manuscript.

She went into her morning room, where a bright fire gave the effect of homely comfort to enhance its dainty luxury and ease. For a few moments she moved about among her cabinets, her soft gray dress and light footfall making no sound, taking up with a tender wistful air some of the costly trifles with which they were strewn. As she thus handled and examined the perfect bronze, the priceless bit of old china, the thought that passed through her mind was how soon she had familiarized herself to this new atmosphere of lavish expenditure, this indulgence of æsthetic instincts, and how the value of one of these artistic toys would have seemed a mine of wealth to her but a short year ago.

She had known so much of the pressure of poverty that she was half doubtful of the right of spending so much on the externals of life, and, like all beings of deep feeling and high aspiration, was inclined to ask herself what right she had to a happiness so exceptional as her own.

She had her husband's note in the pocket of her dress, and she drew it out and read it over again. All she knew was that it had been left by a messenger at the door the previous evening, and she did not read it again from any sense of dissatisfaction with its contents, for her loyal and unsuspicious nature accepted the explanation of his absence as thoroughly adequate.

Her motive was to see if she had missed any intimation of the time she might expect his return that day.

She still held it in her hand when a servant entered with a card.

"Was she at home to so early a visitor?"

The card bore Helstone's name, and Sybil turned a little pale as she read it, some subtile impression touching her that there was a connection between this unusual visit and Karslake. Had it not been for this indefinable suspicion she would have felt a girlish pride in receiving her old friend in her new home.

"Yes," she said, "I am at home, and will see Mr. Helstone at once."

When the door opened she crossed the room to meet him, but started back involuntarily at the sight of his pale and haggard countenance.

"What is wrong?" she asked, eagerly. "Has something dreadful happened at your own house?"

Helstone looked her through and through with his keen, hungry eyes: he had spent not only a sleepless night, but had made no attempt to court sleep, counting the slow hours till the time when he could decently call upon the woman he loved and pitied beyond measure, in order to fulfil his stern duty towards her, and inflaming both his love and his hate during the protracted vigil.

And now he saw her for the first time with all her luxurious surroundings, happy and smiling in perfect ignorance of the blow with which he was to destroy her peace. There was no anxiety in that clear glance, no shadow of conjugal suspicion in tone or aspect. For a moment he hesitated. Had it been a question of pure self-sacrifice he had been equal to make it, but it behooved him as a point of relentless duty to open her eyes to her own dishonor; his heart would bleed for her, but he had told her husband that when the hour arrived for her enlightenment he would choose misery for her rather than disgrace.

"My dear," he said, taking her hand quietly, "it is not in my own house that something dreadful has happened, and you may be quite sure I should not cross the threshold of yours except under some form of compulsion."

There was a deliberate solemnity in his manner that could not but produce its effect. It was unlike the vindictive prepossession he had revealed on other occasions when her husband was the subject of his warnings and reproach; she could not help recalling, with a pang, the agitation she had witnessed the day before, and dreading lest some inevitable connection was to be traced between it and Karslake's singular and unexpected absence. For all that, the courage and loyalty of her nature moved her to repress the slightest sign of misgiving.

"Sit down," she said, drawing a chair towards the fire and taking another herself, opposite to him: "it is such a pleasure to me to see you at last in my own house that I will not inquire too closely into the motive of your coming. I am quite sure it is out of regard to what you think my true interests."

"Think!" he repeated, with a sort of pathetic bitterness; and then he took the chair offered, and sat for a moment or two gazing into the sweet serene face with a feeling of remorseful tenderness.

"I am risking all I care for most in coming here to-day," he resumed. "Whether you believe or pretend to disbelieve the truth of what I am going to tell you, you will equally hate me for the telling of it. You got the note I brought last night?"

"*You* brought?"

"Yes; strange as it may well appear that I should play lackey to Mr. Karslake. But I spared you a night of watching and anxiety: that was my actuating motive. He is not come home?"

"Not yet," she answered, with a tender dignity that touched him to the quick. "I do not expect him yet."

"It may be," he rejoined, passionately, "that even his audacity is scarcely equal to facing immediately the wife he has outraged. Nay, Sybil, command your patience a few moments," for she had made a gesture of indignant repudiation: "you must listen to what I have to say."

"But I refuse to listen! It was incumbent upon me to do so once, as a guest in your house and before any legal ties bound me to Julian Karslake. Now I am his wife, and even you shall not malign him in my presence."

"Malign!" he repeated, almost maddened by her expression of proud confidence and the fear of defeat, and pouring out his words in defiance of her protest. "Do I malign him by the statement of plain facts? I saw him last night leaning over the bedside of his dying child, and admitting to the very doctor in attendance that the tie that bound him to its mother was an illicit one. It was to console that unhappy mother that he absented himself from home last night."

Sybil had tried and failed to arrest the words, and now that she had heard them it was as much as she could do to repress the cry of anguish they seemed to tear from her heart. She got up from her seat pale as death, but still maintaining her proud and resolute demeanor. Her first impulse, doubting her own strength, had been to lean against the mantelpiece for support, but she checked it as an indication of weakness.

She felt like some stout swimmer from whose grasp the saving rope has been torn, but who still relies on his own ability to regain it. For a brief space, while those cruel *words were in her ears,* she felt her hold upon her husband's honor slackening, and it was a space that seemed to enclose within it the very bitterness of death ; but already her faith revived. It had only been a momentary and instinctive disloyalty.

Helstone, intensely observant of the effect of his words, had made a movement of eager sympathy towards her, but she repelled him with an imperious gesture. He misunderstood her entirely.

"Sybil," he murmured, devouring the pathos of her face with his burning gaze, "when the first shock of outraged womanhood is past, you will learn to thank me for putting it in your power to prove your right to freedom. Never, surely, was so sweet a woman so sinned against before!"

"Is it possible," she asked, with a brave and successful effort to speak calmly, "that you believe that I have accepted your assertions? My trust in Julian's fidelity at this moment is as absolute as if you had never spoken. What grieves me is the determined malice and cruelty of one who has been my friend until to-day. Henceforth, Mr. Helstone, you and I are strangers."

He stared at her for a moment in incredulous astonishment, then broke into a derisive laugh.

"Child," he said, "what good will it do to play off these queenly airs on me? Will your infatuated refusal to believe in facts rob these facts of their remorseless stubbornness? All these circumstances, which a happy chance has brought under my own cognizance, I shall lay before the next meeting of Mr. Karslake's parish. As a parishioner I have a right to do this, though even as an outsider I should be justified in exposing such a nefarious imposture as his. I can produce witnesses in support of my accusations. Shall you be content to wait and see how he rebuts the charge?"

She looked at him with a sort of confused horror. His relentless face, the cruel tones of his voice, seemed to obliterate the individuality of the kind and genial man she had known in former years, and the threat he now uttered was a formidable one. Would he do this thing? She saw at a glance it involved ruin to her husband; for, granting that he consented to repudiate the accusation, no reputation is fair enough nor virtue sufficiently pure to resist the tarnish of so foul a suspicion. And if, as she knew was possible, he should *refuse to consent?*

"You cannot mean what you say," she answered, at last, passing her hand over her brow with an irresistible movement of oppression: "it would be an act of absolute malignity. Why do you make so sure of his guilt? I should have thought your professional knowledge of life might have taught you how often appearances and truth are at variance. Cannot you conceive of circumstances that may bind the lips of an innocent man to silence?"

"An innocent man! By God, Sybil; you try me more than I can bear! An innocent man, whom I have seen with his doting mistress at his knees, and his false face white with anxiety for the bastard he denies! You, blind with conjugal passion, believe I am going to throw dirt on the white raiment of a saint. Instead, I am going to discover the vilest hypocrite that ever walked."

"You think so; I know you conscientiously think so; but you are wrong." She spoke in a voice of passionate though controlled emotion, but it only served to intensify his sense of her incredible delusion.

"You plead in vain," he said, sternly, "for it is my zeal for your own honor and happiness that moves me in this matter. It is just possible that I may have an alternative to propose hereafter, but that will need further consideration."

There was a pause between them, during which Sybil's ears caught the sound of the door-bell and the slight bustle of an arrival. The next moment she heard Karslake's voice inquiring of the servant where she was. She rose immediately.

"My husband is come," she said, "and I must go and meet him. I will return and speak to you again, if you think fit to wait." And then she crossed the room swiftly, "on the wings of her insensate love," he thought to himself, and went out, closing the door upon him.

The next moment she had joined Karslake in the hall, where he still stood somewhat slowly and wearily divesting himself of his overcoat, and drew him with a gracious smile and touch into the library, which was the room nearest at hand.

"Come here, and let me look at you," she said, with an assumption of rare playfulness. "I want to see how you bear the brunt of a night's watching."

She was standing in the embrasure of the bay-window, but the dismal October day shed but a murky light. He went close up to her, put his hands lightly on her shoulders, and looked down into her upraised face. Their eyes met with intense though restrained expression. He looked not only pale and weary, which fatigue might easily have justified, but absolutely wan and haggard, but for all that the gaze that met hers was as clear and steadfast as ever.

"Have you some questions to ask, some misgiving to satisfy? You look at me, Sybil, as if you wished to question not my face, but my heart and soul. Are you displeased?"

"Is the child better?" was her answer.

In point of fact she had probed as deep as he suggested, and was fully satisfied with the result, but some subtilty of feeling induced her to play on the verge of the escaped danger.

"He is conscious this morning, but I fear will scarcely have strength to rally."

"And that will be a great grief to you?"

"It will be a great grief to me," he answered, gravely, "and almost a death-blow to his unhappy mother."

In spite of her firmness, Sybil involuntarily drew back a little and changed color. Then, as she met his questioning and almost stern glance, the crimson rushed into her face: it was she who dropped her eyes as if conscience-stricken.

"Can it be possible," he said, "that you have seen Gilbert Helstone?"

"He is in the house at this moment. I have only just left his presence to give you a welcome home."

Karslake turned pale even to the lips; his eyes kindled and scintillated with passion.

"This is an outrage that cannot be suffered," he said, hoarsely, and crossed the room to lay his hand on the bell.

Sybil sprang forward to arrest the movement.

"What are you going to do, Julian? Summon some servant to dismiss him and exasperate him still further? No, no: I want you to take another course from that!"

He forbore in deference to her entreaty, but at the same time he turned from her with a haughty coldness that cut her to the heart.

"You said just now you came to welcome me home. What am I to think, Sybil,—that you are able to reconcile your duty to me with Gilbert Helstone's intolerable persecution? *Have you allowed* him to tell you what happened last night?"

"I have allowed it," she answered, with a sense of injustice that brought tears of agonized disappointment to her eyes, "simply because it was physically impossible to prevent it. What more could you require than that I should protest against his calumnies before they were uttered, and indignantly repudiate them afterwards? Do you count it nothing that in face of the evidence he puts forward I still retain my faith in your fidelity?"

"That is," he said, in a low suppressed voice of concentrated indignation, "that I am to be grateful because you, my wife, hesitate to believe me guilty of an almost incalculable depth of baseness and treachery,—that the perjured lover of last year is the shameless adulterer of to-day? You imply that the evidence is so strong to that effect that you go beyond reason and claim the dues of magnanimity in not accepting it? And I, on my part, say——" and then he stopped abruptly. "I am not equal to this contention to-day," he added, more calmly, "and the less I say the better. I will accept the faith you still retain, Sybil, and try and be thankful that you are disposed to welcome me home."

He stooped and kissed her as he spoke, as if he remembered this conventional act of greeting had not passed between them, and then turned and left the room.

Sybil drew a breath of intense mental pain, but it was for him, not for herself. The measure of passionate feeling which he had manifested had shown her, as he had never done before, what was the extent of suffering produced by the false position in which he was placed, and excited her minutest comprehension and tenderest sympathy.

He was right in resenting her appeal to his consideration. To believe in him was indeed the most elementary of duties, and his own acute sense of outraged rectitude might well render him sensitive to doubt or hesitancy on her part. Never should he accuse her of such laxity again!

She sat down in his accustomed seat, and, covering her face with her hands, tried to concentrate her mind upon the situation. This state of things could not continue; and she was unable to deny that the position was not only inexplicable, but to the cool eye of reason incredible as well. Granting that their conjugal happiness could stand this desperate strain, *what motive was* adequate enough to justify her husband's exaction of it? She was certain of his love for her: what then must be the power of this terrible influence which could neutralize so many and supreme obligations?

At this point she recalled Helstone's recent threat with a feeling of abhorrence that was increased by reflection, but at the same time with some dawning sensation of relief. The remedy was, indeed, nauseous and desperate, but it might succeed in effecting the result desired. It was morally impossible to suppose that Karslake would sacrifice his public character and credit and cut short a useful and exemplary career by persistence in this obstinate silence. The spiritual martyrdom of such a course of action would be so terrible to a man of his temperament that the prospect of it would surely suffice to shake his resolution.

At this moment she heard and recognized Helstone's step in the passage; he was doubtless tired of waiting for her return, and on the point of departure. She rose and went out into the hall to meet him, for, though she would have disdained to propitiate him on her own account, she stifled any such reluctance where her husband's interests were concerned.

"I was coming back to speak to you," she said. "Have you anything more to say to me?"

"Only to bid you ponder what I have told you this morning, and to convey to Julian Karslake my intentions as regards the future. Ah! that touches you, Sybil, but I have no pity! Rather, mine is a sort of heavenly discipline. I will not spare a single stroke of the rod that may serve to break your infamous union."

"And how would that do it?" she asked, with a smile of quiet contempt.

"How? If he should continue to refuse to tell you the truth under the pressure I am going to put upon him, even you can no longer affect to doubt his guilt; and, that admitted, Griselda herself would refuse to live with him. A wife that could condone such offences would sink to the level of the man's degradation, or below it. You think me hard? I am, and nothing could have made me so, short of infamy like his and infatuation like yours. But there is your luncheon-bell. I wish you a better appetite for your repasts than I have had for mine lately."

CHAPTER XXIV.

WHEN husband and wife met again there was no reference made to the painful incidents of the last twenty-four hours. Karslake had recovered his usual composure, and Sybil perceived by his manner that he strictly guarded himself against inquiry or explanation. She said to herself, "He does not fail to take me at my word, and stretch 'my inflexible belief' to the uttermost."

But, as her loving faith responded to the demand, she felt no sense of injury; only in the near future it would behoove her to enter again on this controversy, and demonstrate to him that silence and secrecy could be maintained no longer. For the present each took up their respective interests and duties with the same zeal, to all appearance, as before.

Perhaps, as regards Karslake, it was in fact the same, as his conduct was dictated by principles beyond transient and external influences; or it might even have been that the ceaseless watchfulness necessary against self-betrayal, the added strain upon his moral nature, led to a more thorough and determined devotion.

At least so it seemed to the tender and penetrating eyes that watched his daily performance of his routine duty, with unhalting interest and approval. She had known him at times, and cordially excused it, a little impatient with the incessant claims upon his time and energy naturally occurring in a parish like St. Mark's, where the rector was known to identify himself with the life and welfare of all classes of his parishioners; but now his readiness to meet every demand was unfailing in its quiet promptitude.

Nor did this additional stringency assume a harsh or ostentatious character, or lead him to neglect or curtail any of the social or intellectual indulgences in which she took delight. To her his manner had the same tender suavity as before,— a little less caressing and light-hearted, perhaps, but still more earnest and solicitous. Wherever she went among the poor she heard his praises spoken, and discovered that scarcely one-half of his self-denying labors in their behalf came under her own observation or knowledge.

But, in spite of all this outward calm, Mrs. Karslake owned to herself that her blessedness was a thing of the past. To watch the rigorous performance of duty in the man she loved, under conditions of harassing personal anxiety, no allusion to which he ever allowed to escape his self-control, might exalt the passionate esteem in which she held him, but, at the same time, it was a laying of the axe to the root of her peace of mind. There was none of the happy freedom from care, the assured confidence in the future, which had made the first year of her married life almost a festival. Christmas was drawing near, and Jack and Tom were again to be their guests, but she knew that the girlish gayety that had been so exuberant at midsummer was as extinct as its flowers and fruits.

The one point that filled her mind, almost to the exclusion of every other, was the approaching vestry, and the action that Helstone had threatened to take. She had never given Karslake the warning with which she had been charged; it seemed to her a thing almost impossible to do, and she still clung to the hope that Helstone would abandon the intention.

But if that hope were fallacious! Julian must not be suffered to meet his enemy in ignorance of what awaited him. He must be told, and told by her, the shame and ruin that were preparing for him. Under this coercion he must give the explanation hitherto withheld, or what was the alternative?

She knew the character of the mixed crowd that made up the usual vestries at St. Mark's, and shuddered as her imagination suggested the details of the possible scene,—the venom of the accuser, the stupefaction of the audience, to be succeeded by vulgar curiosity and noisy interpellation; and, worst of all, the inward suffering of the accused! He would bear himself—of that she was confident—with unshaken courage and constancy, but at what a cost!

Whether he justified himself or refused to justify himself, the dignity and moral prestige of his position would be lost. There is, alas! very little difference in the result, between suspicion and accusation and the desert of the same: the purity in either case is tarnished, and the outside world stops to make no rigorous analysis. At all risks, this public exposure must be prevented; and perhaps the best and most legitimate method would be to induce her husband to confide his secret to her and authorize her to communicate it to Helstone, and thus deprive him of his power of injury. She would do this at the first opportunity.

By this time, however, the boys had arrived, and took up a good deal of her time and attention, besides reducing her hours of privacy with Karslake to a very few. She was inclined to think, also, that he availed himself of their presence to withdraw himself more and more into the solitude of his library; and on three several occasions he had repeated his visit to the mother and child, always informing her of the fact, and expressing his unfeigned satisfaction at the boy's recovery, but with the most scrupulous abstinence from any word beyond the barest statement.

It was now within a week of New Year's Day, and he had excused himself from joining her and her brothers in some morning expedition, on the plea that he had a good deal of work to do at that time of the year, in the way of balancing accounts and regulating the distribution of the charities of the parish.

"But that is precisely the work, Julian, for which I have a special aptitude," she answered, with a smile. "After dinner I shall come in and help you."

"You forget you have promised to take the boys to Covent Garden. You would not disappoint them of their pantomime?"

"I would disappoint them without hesitation to be of service to you,—to bring back some of those happy working hours we used to enjoy together."

"Used!" he repeated: "is our happiness of the past, Sybil?"

She hesitated, knowing that at any moment Jack and Tom might rush into the room; this was not a suitable opportunity for the hard task she had before her. Still, she might pave the way.

"It would be idle to say it has not suffered," she answered, gravely. "Our love and trust may be the same as ever, but we have lost our light-heartedness. The question is, cannot we win it back?"

He did not answer: if he had expressed what he felt it would have been a despairing negative.

"I have a *matter to* discuss with you when we have time," she continued. "Let us find time for it to-night, after we come home from the theatre and the boys are in bed. I wish you would go with us, and we would make up the arrears of work together. Could you sit out the 'Forty Thieves'?"

"Yes," he said, going up to her and kissing with concentrated feeling the beautiful beseeching face: "why not? I have taken no vows against the innocent pleasures of the world. It will do me a world of good to hear Jack and Tom laugh, and you, too, dear, I hope."

There are few prettier sights than one of our popular theatres during the Christmas holidays. We do not refer to the splendor of the spectacle or the almost noontide radiance of the lights, but to the crowd of happy childish faces that look down from the front seats of the boxes, or upwards from the stalls or pit: some the dainty pets or curled darlings of fortune, all the source more or less of love, or pride, or interest to the friends that have brought them there. An atmosphere of good will and indulgence towards the children, of sympathy with their delight,—a softening reminiscence of the blessed days when we too were young,—seems to pervade the house, and the sweet treble laughter rippling on all sides adds a further element of purity.

Karslake's forethought had secured one of the best boxes for his party, and Jack and Tom were enjoying their privileges to the uttermost. They were not town lads, *blasé* with juvenile dissipations, contemptuous or even critical of pantomimes. It was positively the first they had ever seen, and the intensity of their interest and zest of their enjoyment were proportionate.

Sybil had forgotten all her domestic anxieties in her generous identification with the rapture of her brothers, and was still more oblivious of the attention excited by her own exquisite face as she sat between them, unweariedly responsive to their enthusiasm. Her quiet toilet of ivory-toned silk, high to the throat, where it was edged by lace and pearls, harmonized perfectly with the character of her beauty.

Karslake, who sat behind them, soon became aware that their own box was becoming a centre of attraction, and he had risen to suggest that Sybil should change her place for one which enjoyed the doubtful privilege of the curtain, when it occurred to him it would be an infinite pity to disturb their enjoyment and introduce the disagreeable element of self-consciousness into her mind.'

At that moment she was looking so radiantly happy that he almost caught the infection of her mood; at least he would not risk the spilling of one drop of her pleasure. So he sat down again, and watched the changes of her vivid face, and listened to her low murmuring laughter with a passionate tenderness that seemed to gather concentration with reflection.

Was he, with his bondage to a miserable slavery, to be the blight of that full and joyous existence, when it had been the hope and purpose of his life, ever since he first saw her, to constitute himself the source and crown of her happiness? Her growing anxiety, her deepening gravity of late, caused him a pang of keenest compunction. What was possible to him towards the lifting of this burden he so unwillingly imposed? He dreaded the discussion she had proposed for that evening, for he knew that if it was her intention to touch the theme of his secret trouble, however tenderly or forbearingly, he must be subjected again to the exquisite torture of refusing her the satisfaction she wanted.

At this moment the curtain fell between the acts, and the boys turned eagerly round to talk to him. Sybil's attention, however, had become suddenly fixed; she was constitutionally so keen of vision as to be independent of an opera-glass, but now she slowly took up Julian's, which was lying close to her hand, and levelled it at the pit below. She gazed intently for the space of several consecutive minutes, and when she laid it down at length it was not that she had gazed her fill, but that she mistrusted the strength of her shaking hand.

"What is the matter, Syb? are you faint? What has made you turn so white all of a sudden?" cried Jack, suddenly. "Look at her, Julian!"

"A country girl never faints," she answered, with a desperate effort to rally her firmness, but the more observant Tom interrupted her eagerly.

"It was something she saw down there!" pointing to the pit, and he pressed forward to the front of the box and peered eagerly into the abyss below. Julian came forward and looked over his head.

He had stooped anxiously towards his wife and questioned her with the tenderest anxiety, but for once there was no response on her part. She had withdrawn her pale face well back now behind the shelter of the curtain, and she neither raised her downcast eyes nor replied by word or gesture. But as the power of the shock subsided, and the fugitive blood returned to her heart and cheek, she recovered sufficient firmness to smile away the boys' vague concern with some plausible explanation, and then she concentrated her attention upon her husband, as he swept the pit with his glass in search of the key to her agitation.

But Covent Garden is a large theatre, and not only was the pit densely crowded, but there was the usual commotion of the going out and coming back between the acts, and he seemed baffled.

Then came swiftly the flourish of instruments. the fanfare of trumpets; the curtain rushed up, and the last act and crisis of the piece had begun. Jack and Tom, leaning over the box, forgot everything else in the culmination of the brilliant spectacle, and Julian stood motionless behind them, passing in patient review every face and figure below, within his range of vision.

Sybil, screened from observation, continued to watch him, and at length her heart leaped within her as she perceived his glass become stationary. He has hit the right focus: he is looking now at the lovely woman and lovelier child with whom their own fate seems so inextricably entangled.

What she had seen was this,—a young mother take up her drowsy child from his place, and stand him upon her knees, evidently with the intention of rousing him up. The beauty of the girl and the tenderness which had accompanied the action had first caught Sybil's attention, but as the boy, obeying the stimulus applied, shook back his golden curls and, straightening his tiny figure, daintily clad in a picturesque costume, looked up and around him,—the light from above seeming to fall direct upon his face,—she felt as if she had received an electric shock. She could not analyze it; she could not say whether it were jealousy, doubt, or conviction: all she was conscious of was sharpest pain.

Karslake continued to hold the glass with unshaken firmness; he was well within the shelter of the box, and the objects of his attention were now intent upon the stage, or, if otherwise, had but feeble interest in the circles above them. He did not in any way blench or change color, although he was quite aware his wife's pathetic eyes were on his face; the lines of brow and mouth deepened a little,—that was the only external sign. The inward sensation was that of a man who sees the resistless waters coming nearer, to overwhelm the point of safety on which he stands.

He put down the glass at length, and leaned towards Sybil.

"Will you like to go home?" he asked.

She shook her head, glancing at the eager faces of her brothers, and then silence reigned between them. He sat down with folded arms and immovable face in the seat he had occupied before, and she tried to employ the interval in searching and regulating the chaos of her mind.

Presently he rose and went forward again to the front, taking the seat she had vacated, not, as her eager observation decided, for any other purpose than to engage the attention of the boys and to cover her abstraction. In the same way he succeeded, during the drive home, in keeping them so actively employed with the animated discussion of the pantomime that Sybil's unusual silence passed unchallenged. Jack, to be sure, sat holding his sister's hand in his, and silently wondered what made her so quiet, but it could be nothing very wrong when she had been so merry an hour before, and Julian had tucked all her shawls and wraps so affectionately about her. She was so happy with Julian, and he was such a good fellow.

"I will give the boys their supper, if you would prefer to go to your room for a little while," he said, as he handed her out of the carriage. "Do not think," he added, with a slight flush of color as he met her grave examining glance, "that I wish to avoid the discussion you spoke of: you can join me in the library when they are gone to bed."

"Thank you," she answered, in a tone without emotion or inflection.

She went up-stairs to her dressing-room, cheerful with shaded lamp and glancing firelight. Sybil had no professed maid,—it was a thraldom to which she could not submit,—so that no intrusive eyes were in attendance. She locked the door, threw off her cloak, and threw herself into the luxurious easy-chair drawn temptingly close to the fire, with a reckless abandonment of feeling such as she never remembered to have known before. Her state of mind was indefinable: it seemed like dissolution or chaos.

Where was her inflexible belief? Some familiar words torn from their context seemed to haunt her mind with a weird appropriateness: "I have heard of thee with the hearing of the ear, but now mine eye seeth thee." What force did Helstone's denunciations and convictions gather now that they were backed by the deadly argument, recognized by herself, conveyed in the marvellous resemblance of that child's beautiful upturned face!

Oh, God! could he have deceived her? She sat with her hands over her eyes to shut out the light, and looked down mentally into the abyss of that possible baseness,—a baseness than which there could be no lower depth. It was to her agonized soul the very Valley of the Shadow of Death, but after a space she struggled through it to the light of day.

She could hear, as she sat, the light laughter of the boys, and the occasional tones of Karslake's voice, sweeter and clearer and with a truer ring than any other she had ever known.

Oh, how the human voice speaks to the living human heart! Slowly her hands dropped restfully into her lap, and she felt her stricken faith rise and quicken into renewed life.

After all, what did she know now that she had not known before? Her husband's proud denial availed as much over the evidence of her material vision as over that of Gilbert Helstone's. Only it brought home with intense power to her mind the cruel force of that fatal and bewildering likeness, and supplied the most stringent motives—nay, they were irresistible—for pressing upon him the necessity of explanation.

CHAPTER XXV.

At this moment she heard the boys rushing up-stairs to bed, and knew they would not pass without besieging her door. She had just time to turn the lock and open it before they reached it, and to stand in the door-way to bid them enter, her tall, white-draped figure irradiated by the light within.

"Oh, Tom! isn't this jolly?" cried Jack, flinging himself on the hearth-rug and basking in the fire-rays like a spaniel; "and Syb looks like a fairy queen."

"Of somewhat exaggerated dimensions," returned she, smiling, for she was gallantly bent on sending them to bed without even the slightest cloud upon their brightness.

"Well, at least you'll own your life is like fairy-land," said Jack. "I never knew what pretty things there were in the world before. This room, too! Think of your bedroom at Ashlands, Syb, with two wooden chairs and a big bath that we used to fill with water for you! And then what a different thing it must be to live with Julian Karslake than father! —I'm glad I know him!"

"He saved your life," remarked Tom, who always considered this an incident of distinction: "you ought to be fond of him."

"I should like him just as well if he hadn't: at least he didn't save Syb's life!"

He got up from the rug as he spoke, and knelt at his sister's feet, with his elbows in her lap, his chin on his hands, and his bright eyes fixed on her face.

"There's one thing, dear, I can't quite make out,—whether you always were so very, very pretty and we didn't know it, or whether you have grown so of late. Perhaps the lovely gowns make a difference."

"Yes, Jack, that's the solution that I like best. But come, you must be off to bed!"

"I used to think," continued Jack, without moving an inch, "that when I was a man, and had got on in the world, I would pay you back for some of the hard work you did for us all. Now that is all over: you have everything that heart can desire."

"Who knows?" said Sybil, shrinking involuntarily under the boy's eager words, as if they cast a foreboding before them. "The future is always a sealed book, and no woman on earth can be so happy but a brother's love can make her happier. Come, Jack, you are getting pathetic, and I must insist on your taking yourselves off. Did Julian give you a good supper?"

"Oysters, mince-pies, Stilton cheese, and Burton: what would the youngsters at home say?"

"Syb looks pale again, Jack," remarked Tom. "You're such a fellow to talk! Let's kiss her and go to bed."

At length they were gone, and now late as it was and weary as she felt, she had her terrible task to perform. She knew that under any circumstances sleep would have been impossible without disburdening her mind of its load. Only might she have grace to do it without adding to his!

She went down-stairs very slowly. The habitual elasticity of her step seemed gone, and equally strange and unnatural was the set and strained expression of her face. She opened the library door without knocking: it was not an intentional negligence, but an oversight of intense preoccupation. Karslake was waiting for her there: he was standing by the fire leaning over the high mantel in an attitude habitual to him, facing the door as if watching for her entrance. He looked at her intently as she came in, placed a chair for her, and said,—

"I have never seen you look so pale: you are as white as your gown. Sybil, what does it mean?"

"That I am sick with anxiety lest you should refuse the request I am going to make."

"Yes," he answered, in a tone of tender encouragement, "you know beforehand that any request of yours is granted as soon as preferred,—if possible."

She covered her eyes with her hands. An almost unconscious prayer went up from her heart to the Power outside and beyond herself; then she rose up and stood by his side.

"Julian, you know whom I have seen to-night, and what effect it has had upon me. I could not help it. My faith in you at this moment is firm as ever, or I should not be standing here; but I do not deny that for a time it gave way under the sickening recognition of that lovely child's resemblance to yourself. You must not blame me for it: it was an instinct of physical perception that reflection and judgment corrected. Personally, I accept your assurances on this point implicitly, but I understand to-night as I never did before that it is almost a moral impossibility that others should believe you too. You are not angry?"

"No, I am not angry."

"You will understand I allude to Gilbert Helstone, and you are very good," with a faint smile, "to bear the allusion so patiently. But you may be quite sure I should not name him without some very strong motive indeed."

Karslake's feelings were something like those of a victim stretched on the rack and awaiting the first turn of the screw.

"I quite understand," he said, gently. "It is unnecessary to offer any assurance of the motives which influence you in this matter, dear. Tell me simply what you want me to do."

"I want you to disarm Mr. Helstone's animosity. I want you to deprive him of the power of doing you a deadly injury."

"As how?" he asked. "My wife believes in me, what other injury can he do me? I can endure his misjudgment, and you must learn, Sybil, to do so too."

She turned aside from the touch of his caressing hand: it was more than she could bear. Her next question seemed to him a strangely irrelevant one.

"Is the day fixed for the New Year vestry?" she asked.

"Not quite," he answered, giving no expression to the surprise he felt. "I find a note here from my churchwarden to-night, proposing January 4 as suiting the general convenience: therefore it will suit mine."

"In that case I must give you Mr. Helstone's message,—one that he left with me that morning you found him here, and which I have kept up to this time because I have not had the courage, or rather the cruelty, to speak. But now there is no alternative." She stopped, her voice choked with emotion.

"Spare me your tears, Sybil, if you can: your distress tortures me."

So did her hesitation, but he would not say that. He turned towards her, and, passing his arm round her waist, he drew her close to his side.

"Tell me now," he said, "point-blank, with as little attempt at softening as if Mr. Helstone were here himself to dictate the words."

"He says he will appear at the board in his right as parishioner, and lay before it a plain statement of the charges he has against you. He says, moreover, he can produce witnesses to support his testimony."

She had obeyed and spoken; how would he receive it? For a moment she dared not raise her eyes to look at him, but involuntarily tightened her hold upon the hand which was passed round her waist.

He returned the pressure passionately but firmly, and this gave her courage to go on.

"Julian," she urged, in a tone of intense pathos, "this is to both of us a matter almost more than life or death. You will put it out of Mr. Helstone's power to do this! I know how strongly you feel on the point, but you will not carry that feeling to the length of sacrificing all that we both hold dearest and most sacred! One duty is supreme till another overrules it, and your duty surely now is to defend your own honor,—and, more, the honor of the creed you profess. Forgive me, dear, if I seem to teach the teacher, or if I remind you that it is not only your happiness and reputation that are at stake. If I was slow to love at first, I love you now with all the energy of my soul: my life is bound up in your welfare."

She broke off and flung her arms round his neck.

"My God!" he exclaimed, shuddering back from the kisses she was laying on his pale lips, "this is more than I can bear! Show me your way of escape, Sybil: I will take it if I can."

"Tell me the story of this mother and child," she answered, with desperate abruptness, "and give me leave to clear your character in Mr. Helstone's eyes."

She withdrew herself from him as she spoke, and sank down again in the chair she had quitted, still keeping her eyes upon his face. Its expression of restrained feeling baffled her. She added, after a moment's pause, seeing that he remained silent,—

"There is no other alternative, Julian. This man is simply bent upon your ruin because he believes in your guilt. Convince him of your innocence, and he will be eager to make atonement. And if it is some secret in which the honor of another is concerned, I know no more loyal nature than his. He could not betray a trust."

"And yet my wife urges me to do so? If it were in my power to lay the whole truth before Gilbert Helstone, he would reject it. It would appear to him only another form of the fraud and lying with which he credits me. It must be enough for me, Sybil, that you do not ask for this guarantee as a condition of your own belief."

She interrupted him. "I do not ask you, Julian, to clear up this mystery personally to Mr. Helstone. Tell me the truth, and trust to my love and skill to convince him of your good faith. If you refuse——" she rose again as she spoke, moved by the irresistible impulse to approach him and overwhelm his evident reluctance by her caresses, but he drew back with a gesture of restraint and pain.

"I am constrained to refuse," he said, steadily, "and do refuse. You love me, Sybil,—your life is bound up in my welfare? Then you will cease to urge me on this point."

"I do not know; I will not promise; your determination drives me to despair. Am I to understand you will suffer Mr. Helstone to fulfil his threat? You will face your vestry, three days hence, with such an ordeal to meet? It is not possible!"

"I have scarcely had time to consider all the consequences that may ensue on my refusal," he answered, "but they resolve themselves into a question of endurance more or less. The one thing I know to be impossible is to speak the words that would clear this mystery. Whatever the alternative, I accept it,—even to the wounding of the happiness that is infinitely dearer to me than my own."

Every word, low as he spoke, fell clear and unhesitating on her ears: it was only the pallor of his set face, and the strenuous grasp with which his fingers closed over the back of a chair near which he was standing, that indicated the intense feeling he held in reserve.

"But," she urged again, "it is not a mere question of your capacity for passively suffering wrong. What do you think would be the practical result of Mr. Helstone's accusation? Would you propose to meet it with nothing more than the miserable equivalent of a blank denial? Julian, beloved! it would be of no use. He would bear down your sweet rectitude with his denunciations and proofs, and two-thirds of your people would believe him, simply because they could not understand any inducement being strong enough to prevent you from establishing your innocence. Will you be able to bear the consequences?"

He looked at her tenderly, with eyes, in spite of his resolution, wet with tears.

"Will *you?*"

"No," she answered, eagerly, "I shall not! If I see you robbed of the respect you have earned and cast aside as guilty of this unparalleled baseness, I cannot bear it! And I will go further, even at the risk of displeasing you. I will never give my consent to your carrying out this act of reckless self-sacrifice to such a bitter end. Consider once more; you do not now stand alone in the world, and are not justified in consulting only your personal bias. I claim to have my rights considered,—my right to the happiness and honor you promised me,—my right not to be made a forced participant in such a public shame and scandal!"

"That is an argument so powerful," he said, "that to resist it must convince you, if nothing else will, of the uselessness of this controversy; and it is also so cruel a reproach that I scarcely expected to hear it from your lips, Sybil. Does your estimate of what I am rest on what the outside world supposes me to be? And when its favor is withdrawn or exchanged for condemnation, will you refuse me the support of your recognition and sympathy? I own these are contingencies I have not considered, but, hard as they are, they even do not shake my resolution."

"I am cruel," she answered, raising her weeping eyes to the rigid calmness of his face, "as a last resource to move you. If I forced my selfish interests upon you, it was simply because I thought you might yield to these when proof against all else besides. In point of fact, your determination and all the trouble that may arise from it will, woman-like, only serve to quicken my devotion. Still, I feel as if I could not give up my judgment in this matter and accept yours. Oh that I knew what plea to use to win you to justice and to reason!"

"If," he answered, for the first time turning from her, as if to hide the workings of his face, "you will forbear to urge me any more, I will take it as a proof of the love you still profess. Nothing that I may have to go through in the future can be worse than what I have borne to-night. In mere human pity do not say another word. If you have thought me hard and unresponsive to all the sweetness of your appeals, it is because I should be lost if I were to let you see what I suffer."

As he spoke he sat down by the table near him and covered his face with his hands. She went up to him and laid her hand gently on his shoulder.

"You will still think me cruel to relentlessness," she said, in tones of the most exquisite tenderness, "but one possible alternative occurs to me. There is time, between this and the day fixed for the meeting, to see Gilbert Helstone and try the effect of an appeal to his forbearance."

He lifted up his colorless face and looked at her with stern surprise.

"Who is to make the appeal,—you or I?"

"You," she replied, bravely, "because my intercession only serves to stimulate his bitterness. Julian, this is not a question in which your conscience is involved. You will at least sacrifice your pride for my sake,—for the sake of a possible reprieve! You will not refuse to yield this little point?"

"Little! it would be a humiliation worse than death, and it would be utterly in vain. Do not ask it, Sybil!"

She remained silent, but she still stood by his side as if awaiting his reaching a different conclusion.

At that moment the clock on the mantel-piece struck twelve: it was New Year's Day.

Karslake rose up with a deep sigh.

"I must send you away to rest," he said, "or how will you meet the boys with a cheerful face in the morning? It would be a mockery to wish you 'A Happy New Year.' Would to God I stood alone in this distress!"

"Do you remember last New Year's Day at Rome," she asked, "when we congratulated each other on being the happiest couple in the world?"

"I remember it, and accept all the reproach you imply. But I had never married could I have forecast the future. Try and believe this, Sybil; let me at least preserve your esteem."

"And could I have forecast the future, Julian, I would still have married you in view of all this bitter pain. You are inexpressibly dearer to me now, in spite of being so stubbornly bent on your own undoing, than in the careless Roman days. If I ask you again on this New Year's morning to grant me a measure of relief by the sacrifice of personal feeling, will you refuse?"

He paused a few moments before he answered: even the tender, high-spirited girl that watched him had no adequate idea of the sharpness of the conflict.

"Well," he said, at length, in low reluctant tones, "there is no escape from an appeal such as that. I dare not forego my duty at your intercession, Sybil, but I am at least free to accept my humiliation. I refuse no longer: I will go and see Mr. Helstone to-morrow."

CHAPTER XXVI.

It was not a seasonable winter; although the temperature was low, the ceaseless rain fell from day to day. The holiday-makers were balked of their favorite pastime. There were no hilarious, excited thousands skimming over the Serpentine, with the ice-like glass beneath their feet, and a cold blue radiant heaven overhead. The town was ankle-deep in slush, and when the rain subsided the fog fell.

Julian Karslake had redeemed his promise to his wife, by calling at Gilbert Helstone's chambers in the Temple on the day following New Year's Day, but he was not to be found there. Julian left a message to the effect that he would call again at the same time on the morrow, but on this second occasion he was disappointed in not finding him at home.

The clerk who admitted him into the dingy room, and poked up the decaying fire, said that Mr. Helstone was not come yet, but had left word yesterday that he should be there in the course of the morning. Would the gentleman wait?

Yes, he would wait. And Karslake sat down, buttoning his overcoat tighter to keep out the penetrating cold, pulling his hat lower over his aching brows, and preparing to turn the delay to what account he could by renewed consideration of the matter before him.

One hour passed and another had almost run out before Helstone appeared, and then it was evident enough to Karslake that the delay had been employed as an intentional insult and annoyance rather than from any professional necessity.

"I do not profess to apologize for having kept you so long waiting," he said, "or to express any regret that you called here in vain yesterday; such conventional courtesies would be a mockery between you and me. I wish it had occurred to you to keep up the fire: you are better guaranteed against the cold than I." And he surveyed his visitor, with a sort of inclusive sneer, from head to foot.

A great deal is said about the ungenerous rivalries and ignoble jealousies of women, but the sterner sex have their kindred weaknesses, and to Gilbert Helstone the fine face and figure and perfect bearing of his enemy were always a fresh offence and provocation.

Karslake took off his hat, not so much from an instinct of civility, as the other retained his, but in some hope of relieving the oppression of his brain. If he had not been bound by his promise to Sybil, he would have left the office at once, so obvious was Helstone's intention to make his humiliation as bitter as possible. But though the failure of his attempt was a foregone conclusion, he had none the less to go through with it.

He stood up, and, leaning a little over the high dust-covered mantel-shelf, looked at Helstone, who had flung himself into a chair by his writing-table, and was leisurely balancing a paper-knife on his thumb, with the quiet steadfast glance habitual to him.

"I am told," he began, "it is your intention to be present at the vestry meeting to-morrow. Is it true?"

A cruel smile slightly curled Helstone's lips. He glanced keenly at the face of the speaker, and his heart quickened as he read in it the anticipated reward of his unwearied exertions.

"It is quite true: have you any objection to make?"

"I have no power to object, but, as a point of courtesy, I should be obliged if you would tell me the object you have in view."

"I believe the meeting is merely a formal one, to pass accounts in connection with the distribution of charities at this festive season of the year, and that one of the churchwardens is to wind up the proceedings with a vote of thanks to the rector for the special zeal and devotion he has displayed in the exercise of his functions. I have applied for permission to second the resolution."

"Yes?" replied Karslake, somewhat mechanically.

"Oh, if you want to know in what terms I shall bear my testimony to your merits, you ask too much. I am not disposed to rehearse my speech in advance: your patience can bear the strain until to-morrow."

"You seem to forget you have already instructed Mrs. Karslake to tell me the plan you have laid for my public humiliation and overthrow. I fully recognize your power to do me a deadly injury, and am here to-day, as I was yesterday, simply to ask you to forego your purpose."

He spoke with so much quiet dignity, with such perfect abstinence from any word or tone that could give offence, that even Helstone felt its influence. He glanced sharply at him and hesitated before making his reply. Then he said,—

"Well, there is one condition on which I will abstain not only from putting in an appearance to-morrow, but from any further interference in your affairs."

He stopped again, and for a longer interval, with no other motive than to protract the painful suspense he knew he must be inflicting, but he did not succeed in extorting any indication of impatience. Karslake waited in undemonstrative silence till Helstone chose to proceed.

"If your wife will consent to leave you on the ground of the evidence of your infidelity which I have laid before her, I will abstain from placing the same proofs before any other tribunal. Otherwise I re-state them to-morrow."

"And that condition I reject peremptorily, both on my own behalf and hers, let the consequences be what they may. If that is the only alternative you have to offer, the object with which I came is already lost, but for all that I will state it. On the first occasion when you accused me in this matter I refused to give you any assurance at all as to my innocence, and since then my denial has been guarded and reluctant. *But now* I am so coerced by circumstances that I am prepared to assert in any way you may demand that your conclusions are absolutely erroneous, and even to beseech you not to drive me to this extremity."

For a few moments Helstone remained silent, with his gaze fastened on his companion, but his cheek was flushed and his deep-set eyes shone with excitement.

"This is a moment worth living for," he said, at length, in a low concentrated tone, "to see your villainy finding you out, and your pride bowed to the point of abject entreaty. Does an innocent man plead with a face blanched with fear, and drops of perspiration on his brow? I repudiate your denial as an audacious lie, and reject your prayer with more contempt than I can put into words. But I would have you take notice that I have well redeemed the pledge I made, as the redresser of Sybil Dorrimore's wrongs, when we both stood by your pansy-beds at Roosden Magna!"

"As a matter of fact, and in justice to my own integrity," replied Karslake, with invincible composure, "I repeat that I have never wronged her any more than that the request I preferred just now was abject, or that guilt or fear had anything to do with the signs of disturbance unfortunately beyond my control. To reduce me to that point of humiliation, either now or to-morrow, is beyond your power, Mr. Helstone. I was led by the strongest considerations to make a last appeal to your manliness of feeling, and to warn you from doing an irremediable wrong. It has failed, but I am conscious of no loss of self-respect because you are impervious to the commonest instincts of humanity."

"Good God!" exclaimed Helstone, springing from his seat and approaching the dauntless speaker with an almost menacing gesture, "will you brazen it out to the end, and add insult to unparalleled injury? But that end is close at hand. Don't delude yourself with any forlorn hope that I shall relent at the last moment, for it is for this issue that I have schemed and labored, or that I shall fail to carry my point and unmask your imposture! I have laid my plans with professional care; my brief is ready and conclusive. I am trusting nothing to the heat and uncertainty of *vivâ voce* controversy. After to-morrow, I defy Mrs. Karslake to keep her place under your roof."

"I *have nothing more to* say," said Karslake, taking up his hat: "you will do your worst, doubtless, but you will fail in one point of your programme, and the rest will be endurable."

He went home slowly, walking through rain and fog the whole distance between the Temple and Bayswater. He wanted time to order his mind anew before he met his wife and told her of the failure of her passionate hope. He dreaded that absolutely as much as, if not more than, the sickening experiences that awaited him on the morrow. The one point on which his mind revolved was the possibility of screening her from the full knowledge of the suffering he must of necessity endure: of the calamity she had a sufficiently adequate idea.

So terrible was the prospect before him, the infamous accusation which he dared not refute, the public shame from which he could not escape, that he began to reconsider with feverish anxiety whether there were no loophole of escape consistent with his honor.

But the conclusion reached was still the same despairing verdict: he was bound in the most absolute bonds; he was pledged against trusting even the fidelity of his wife, whose fidelity, he well knew, would have been impregnable. There was no possible alternative or reprieve.

When at length he reached his home, jaded in mind and body, he went at once to the library.

"Ask Mrs. Karslake to come to me here," he said to the servant. He knew how great her anxiety must have been during his absence, and was inclined to reproach himself for having protracted it so unnecessarily; he was now bound to tell her the result without any further delay. He soon heard her light foot on the stairs, and opened the door for her entrance, shutting it again before he prepared to speak to her.

But he had no need to speak: one glance into his face told Sybil her last hope had failed. A spasm of anguish contracted her heart as she looked at him.

"Forgive me," she said, clasping his hand in hers, and drawing him towards the comfortable easy-chair, placed close to the cheerful fire, for she saw how weary he looked; "forgive me for sending you on such an errand."

She sat down on a low seat at his feet, still holding his hand in hers, and scarcely conscious with what a convulsive clasp her slight, flexible fingers closed over it. And then silence reigned between them for a little while, she gazing steadfastly into the fire and trying to keep back the tears that glazed her eyes, and searching heart and brain in vain for some suggestion of comfort; and he looking down upon her troubled face, and losing all sense of the misery of his own position in remorseful sympathy with hers.

Then to break the painful silence she asked a few questions. "Had the interview been so very long? how had Helstone behaved?" and he, reflecting that she had never been present at any interview between them, and was happily ignorant of the aggravations of the same, answered with due reserve. But he did not deceive her in the least.

"What now remains," he said, "is to meet the inevitable with the best courage we can, and in order to do this I must have the night for consideration. The necessary preparations for to-morrow have been pushed by circumstances to the last moment, and I do not much regret it. The time that remains will suffice, and concentration and strength are best gained in the vigils of the night."

"Do you mean you will sit up alone?"

"Yes, solitude is necessary to my purpose. There are conditions of feeling beyond the reach of even your tender sympathy and love."

She looked up at him with an expression of passionate, yearning pain.

"I see," she answered, trying to hide the depth of her feeling under a smile; "you are bracing yourself to the temper of martyrdom! You are going to fortify your soul by all those spiritual aids which to me are so obscure, and to you so strongly efficacious. They may sustain you, Julian, till the hour of trial is over, seeing it is now so near, but when the reaction comes, and you see the ruin you have wrought, what then?"

"Then," he answered, "I shall thank God He gave me courage to do the duty next to hand, without wasting my strength on the vain consideration of what would follow. But I go too fast, boasting as if I had already won the fight which may prove too hard for me after all."

This was too much for Sybil's acquiescence: her whole mind was in absolute revolt against the course of conduct on which he was resolved, and it was with difficulty she could restrain her former importunity. She forbore, not so much from the conviction that it would be useless, as from her anxiety to spare him any measure of pain or even excitement of feeling in her power.

His present tone and manner, the sort of pale radiance that exalted the beauty of his face, the sense of what he had already submitted to for her sake that morning, so moved her tender sensibility that she must either leave him to fight her own battle alone, or break down in some paroxysm of emotion.

Just then the dressing-bell rang, and she was glad of the excuse to rise at once.

"You must give me a dispensation from dinner to-day," he said. "I cannot eat, and I would rather not encounter your brothers' keen glances."

"Fasting is a bad preparation for a long vigil, especially after sleepless nights."

"On the contrary, it is the first step in the process; but I will not insist on carrying it too far. Send me some soup in here, and I will eat it."

"And you will lie down on the sofa and rest for an hour before the discipline begins; physical exhaustion won't add to your strength to-morrow."

"You are right," he said; "I think I will, on condition that you do not let me sleep too long." And she left the room a little comforted.

CHAPTER XXVII.

An hour after, Sybil returned to the library, and found that Karslake had followed her advice, and was lying fast asleep on the sofa. In her nature there was a large measure of that tender protective compassionateness which has so much of the divine element in it; to relieve pain and suffering was the passionate bias of her soul. She stood for a few moments at his side, tracing in his face the lines of anxiety and care, which seemed more obvious in the collapse of slumber, with an intensity of sympathy that slowly grew into a resolute purpose.

Was there yet no escape? The meeting was fixed for noon the next day, but there were still some hours of possible effort before her. What could she do?

Helstone had hardened his heart against Julian's appeal, and she had small hope that hers would be more effectual, but at least she could try. His house was only a short distance from theirs, and she had all the fearlessness of a country girl in regard to walking alone. At that hour, too, she would be most likely to find him at home; also she would enlist Sara's sympathies in her behalf; of what avail was any further reserve in view of the morrow's eventualities? Then it suddenly flashed upon her mind that, in his last interview with her, Helstone had alluded to some possible alternative he might be induced to offer her. In that case her husband's honor was secure, for there was nothing that could be claimed from her of personal sacrifice that she would not be prepared to surrender.

She decided not to let any one know of her going out. She had induced her brothers to sit down to a little steady school-work for an hour or two, on the plea of returning to the library, and they would think her still shut up there; while, on the other hand, when Julian awoke, he would believe her to be with them. She went out of the room softly, with a parting glance of ineffable tenderness at the sleeper, but refraining from touch or kiss, lest she should wake him.

She let herself out into the road through one of the side-entrances of the house, not venturing to risk attracting attention by opening the front door. It was still raining, and the few scattered lamps of the district burned with a dim lurid light through the murky air. The foggy atmosphere seemed to enclose her; there was no visible heaven above or earth beneath. Keen as her vision was, and acute as were her perceptions of locality, it was with some difficulty she succeeded in finding the house she wanted in Burnham Square.

The maid that admitted her beamed a surprised welcome, for she knew Sybil well.

"Are your master and mistress both at home?" she asked, and without any attempt to conceal the anxiety she felt as to the reply.

In a moment the little sitting-room where Sara usually sat when alone was opened, and she herself hurried out into the hall to greet her guest.

"Sybil, my dear, is it you? So late, and on such a night! but come in, come in; you are more welcome than words can *express.*"

She insisted on taking off her wet cloak with her own hands, and sending it to the kitchen to be dried, with many implicit instructions to the maid; and then she drew her inside the cosey little apartment with which Sybil was so pleasantly familiar, made her sit down by the fire, and was even hospitably bent on taking off her wet boots.

But this Mrs. Karslake would not allow.

"They are not wet through, I assure you, and I shall not have time to stay very long; but how good of you to be so pleased to see me!"

"Good!" repeated Sara, who had now subsided into a seat on the other side of the hearth, planting her own feet firmly on the fender, as an encouragement for her visitor to do the same. "Why, child, you forget I never go out and speak to my kind as other people do. Besides, you are a special favorite of mine; but I thought you had been forbidden to come here."

"I have never been forbidden: it is your brother's conduct which has made it impossible till now. I hope he is at home?"

"Yes," said Sara, dropping her voice a little, "he is still sitting over the dinner-table: he drinks more wine than he used to do, and I'm afraid the tempers of neither of us improve."

Sybil lifted up her beautiful face full of tender sympathy.

"Do your troubles increase?" she asked, with as profound a pity for the harassed woman before her as if her own heart were not sick with care; "are things worse than they were? is he as good as ever?"

"I think he is as good as ever,—to *her*," she answered, with a short laugh, "but certainly not to me. He cannot bear contradiction, and will not forgive me for not abusing Mr. Karslake as he does. But, my dear, I am not quite going to believe that you came here to-night to ask after our troubles: they stand pretty much as they were. Tell me what makes you look so pale and sad: you have not quarrelled with your husband?"

Sybil shook her head with a conclusive smile, but it was such a pathetic one that Miss Helstone felt the tears rise to her eyes.

"Can you tell me what is the matter, my dear?"

"I am come on purpose to tell you everything, and to ask your advice; but"—with a sudden flush of painful crimson—"you know what your brother's charge against my husband is?"

"Not exactly; I have never cared to press the point; it is some breach of morality of which I am certain he is as innocent as myself. We will take that for granted."

"No, we will take nothing for granted," said Sybil, in a low voice. "It will be necessary for you to hear a long story."

She looked at her watch: it was eight o'clock.

"Can I depend on seeing Mr. Helstone later? He will not go out?" she asked the question with intense anxiety.

"He cannot go out of the house, or even leave the room opposite, without our hearing him," said Sara, "and I would stop him at once. That is right!" as Sybil moved near to her; "come and sit on the cushion at my feet; contact gives confidence, and my whole heart will go with you, my dear."

Thus encouraged, and in defiance of strong natural reluctance, Sybil told her story, and Sara listened with her keen perceptions all on the alert, and, it must be confessed, with an ever-increasing sense of dismay and astonishment. There was no attempt made by the wife to reduce or soften the evidence against her husband; she gave the facts as blankly as Helstone himself could have done, feeling that perfect sincerity was the only condition of success. At length she reached the culminating point,—Helstone's determination to bring the matter before the next day's vestry, and her strenuous hope of being able to win him from his purpose.

So ominous a silence fell as Sybil ceased to speak, that she turned round with pained surprise to look into her friend's face.

Sara was sitting with brows knitted and lips compressed into an expression of stern perplexity. As the girl looked up she suddenly bent over her, raised her face between her hands, and gazed into it with piercing inquiry.

"And you believe in your husband's fidelity with that clear head of yours,—not with the blind infatuation of too fond a wife? It is hard to understand!"

"What do you take me for?" asked Sybil, with a gesture of proud self-assertion. "Am I a likely woman to condone offences *such as these*,—offences that would involve a depth of baseness difficult to calculate? I believe in his honor as I believe in my own. I trust him as I trust in God."

Sara looked at her with a cynical yet kindly smile.

"And you love him, child, with that extravagance of feeling that you may well pause and ask whether your judgment is free enough for an unbiassed opinion."

"My love is not extravagant," replied Sybil, in a voice of indignant pain, "but is rather the slow and reluctant fruit of conviction and reason. I have lived in as close intimacy with Julian Karslake as is possible for a wife to live with her husband, and know him to be without reproach. Without reproach! that is a poor way of expressing what I have learned and proved of the sweetness and strength, the tenderness and patience, of his character. If I did not love him now with all the faculty of loving that I have, it would be because I was blind or insensible. And do not imagine that I am influenced by the beauty of his person or the charm of his manner,—they would not move me apart from this real goodness,—though I grant," she added, in a lower tone, "they help to make daily intercourse a privilege and a delight."

"My dear," said Sara, "all that is very fine language, but just means, in my vernacular, being over head and ears in love; and that, again, means you must be on your guard against being blinded by the strength of your feelings. This is a very serious business."

"And you incline to believe there is justification for your brother's conduct?"

"Whatever I believe," said Sara, gravely, "can stand over for future consideration. The night grows late, and I am almost as anxious as you are that Mr. Karslake should be spared this public exposure. Will you go in to Gilbert alone, or shall I ask him to come to you here?"

"I would rather see him here, in your presence;" but her heart sank at the prospect before her, for Sara's lack of faith seemed a new proof of the strength of the evidence against her husband. If a stanch supporter of his cause could doubt so easily, what could be expected of the indifferent outside world?

Sara was absent longer than might have been expected, and Sybil could not help hearing their voices in angry discussion. Presently she came back with a heavy, sullen look.

"He refuses to see you unless you go to him, my dear; he will not come here or talk before me. Will you do so?"

"Certainly; I will go," said Sybil, rising at once: "there is no other choice." Sara went over to her side and kissed her.

"God bless you, my dear Sybil!" she said, solemnly, and to the poor girl's excited mind there seemed a foreboding in the benediction.

Helstone was seated at the table, with wine and nuts before him, and he had already drunk enough to disturb the perfect equilibrium of brain and temper. As Mrs. Karslake crossed the room so as to approach the place where he sat, and he marked the swift grace of her movements and the beauty of the pale sad face, which seemed to gain some new charm of expression every time he saw it, he felt the hot blood rush to his brow, and said to himself that this time he should not be able to hold his passion in check.

"You were not afraid to come and speak to me alone?" he said, placing a chair for her.

"I was not afraid," she said, coldly: "it is a feeling of which I have little experience. I should have liked Sara to be present simply because I wanted her help. You know why I am come?"

Her voice fell from the pitch of womanly dignity, with which she had begun, to the thrilling pathos of a despairing appeal. She lifted her eyes, wet with unshed tears, and pushed back the heavy weight of her abundant hair from her brows, with a gesture familiar to him from her childhood when she was in trouble.

"I do not know," he replied, hoarsely: "you must tell me."

"To renew the request you have already refused," she said, more firmly; "to ask you to drop this persecution of my husband."

The word stung him to the quick; the very pallor of her face, the vibrations of love and suffering in her voice, and the anguish of her glance, hardened his heart against her. If she had loved him less her chance would have been greater.

On the table, close to his hand, lay a thick packet sealed and addressed. He called her attention to it.

"This is my answer," he said: "I am going to forward this packet by to-night's post to Mr. Karslake's churchwarden, with the request that before the vestry meets he will try and *communicate its contents* to his brother official. It contains a dry professional statement of the evidence I have at command in proof of his immorality before marriage and his infidelity afterwards. Those finer traits of infamy and fraud, through which he has succeeded in reducing your mind to a state of slavish credulity, I have not insisted on: the public need not be invited to discuss that matter. I have done this, Sybil, to make the object I have in view the surer,—the exposure of the most shameless impostor one could meet with in a lifetime, and a woman's deliverance from a degrading bondage."

She passed over all there was of offence in his speech; the facts alone moved her.

"But you will not send it! I do not argue nor even plead for Julian, only for myself! The happiness of my life hangs on this point. Spare him for my sake,—for the sake of the old days at Ashlands, when you were my best and kindest friend."

She went up to him and laid her hand on his arm; he shook it off almost fiercely.

"Sit down, Sybil, for mercy's sake! If this man were common cheat or libertine I could forgive him; but he has cajoled and betrayed a girl who was and still is to me the dearest and most sacred thing on the face of God's earth, and of whose honor I think more by countless lengths than my own. Every word you utter in his favor only confirms my resolution. I am going to save you in spite of yourself."

She was silent: he went on again.

"I have told you before that I have laid my plans carefully. The shock of indignation and surprise would have been too much for the meeting, without some steps of preparation. Now his churchwardens will come primed with facts and fury, and will be eager to listen to what further statements I shall have to make. Possibly, also, each man will have bruited the scandal to his nearest neighbors and friends, for I have given no hint at secrecy. Julian Karslake will find himself in a new atmosphere, charged with suspicion and outraged decency, instead of favor and respect. Don't deceive yourself, Sybil, with the idea that they will not believe it,—that his immaculate character will speak for him. To prevent any reaction in his favor that his excellent acting might produce, I shall clinch the matter by ocular demonstration."

Sybil's cheek blanched with terror: it was with difficulty she could repress a cry of pain.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"I mean that I shall show the child to the meeting. It is a theatric touch that I personally dislike, but rather than Julian Karslake should escape the full weight of his shame I will stoop to it. I have made friends, or affected to do so, with the boy. His poor simple-hearted mother knew that on one occasion I followed your husband to her house, and imagines consequently that I am his friend: so there has not been much difficulty. I spare her——" his heavy brows contracted ominously. "I will spare you too," he added, glancing at the anguish-stricken wife, "and could almost feel a disdainful pity for the man himself in the crisis of his downfall."

For a few moments Sybil sat motionless, crushed with despair. It was all true; the completeness of the disgrace would exceed her worst apprehensions: it would be absolute. Julian brought face to face with that fatally gifted child would, indeed, be at the mercy of his relentless enemy.

Helstone sat watching the changes of her face with glowing eyes: presently he rose and approached the bell.

Almost with the swiftness of light she sprang from her seat, and intercepted his intention. "What are you going to do?" she demanded.

"Simply to despatch my letter to the post. Do you still hope to circumvent my purpose?"

"Oh, wait!" she cried, passionately; "it must not be done, —he could not bear it! You spoke before of an alternative. Show me any way of deliverance, and I will accept it."

He seemed to hesitate, and, taking out his watch, looked at the dial. "I have not much time for parley," he said, harshly, "nor shall I try as I have done before to win you to a sense of womanly dignity. Here is my alternative. If you will pledge your word to leave your husband, on the sufficient grounds of his wrongs against you, I drop my persecution; that is, I fling this letter in the fire, and suffer him to cheat his followers to the end of the chapter."

"Leave him! I do not understand."

"As you please. I am indifferent as to your decision. The pressure of social opinion will constrain you to do ultimately what you now refuse,—the only difference being that in the one case you keep your idol on his pedestal."

He spoke quietly, but every pulse in his body throbbed with excitement. To rob Julian Karslake of the woman he himself adored, and of whom the other was utterly unworthy, would be a keener rapture of vengeance than even his public humiliation. Hitherto the younger man, with his gifts of fortune and nature, had forestalled, circumvented, and beaten him,—had appropriated, enjoyed, but not exhausted that experience of blessedness he had so silently but strongly desired for himself. Not exhausted,—no! He had never trusted himself to see them together since their marriage, but he knew, if only from the young wife's manifestations, how close was the bond of union between them, and what would be the intolerable hunger of the soul—the blankness of desolation—that must follow on its rupture.

He stood still with the letter in his hand and his eyes on his watch: furtively he watched Sybil. He had said more than once that he chose for her misery rather than shame, but the misery was more intense than he expected, and though it did not shake his purpose one iota it cost him almost more than he could bear to restrain the expression of his own feelings.

Only, he knew that one hint of his selfish passion would rob him of his revenge.

"You will think me very hard," he said, breaking the silence, "but in five minutes' time I must close this miserable controversy; that is, I shall despatch my letter if you do not give me the pledge I require."

"I do not quite understand," answered the unhappy girl, passing her hand over her eyes as if to clear her troubled vision. "For how long am I to leave him? where am I to go?"

"For how long?" he repeated. "For just as long as his reputation is of the same account in your estimation as it is to-day; for as surely as you return to him, or even, however slightly, break the pledge of utter separation, so surely shall I take up the business of public exposure, precisely where I lay it down to-night. As for where you should go, you will have plenty of friends to advise you on that point."

She stood before him, erect, motionless, her hands clasped with almost convulsive stringency, her dilated eyes gazing straight before her, as if into the blackness of the darkness of the terrible future. Then an involuntary shudder shook her from head to foot: she brought her gaze slowly back on Helstone's face.

"Have pity!" she said, with a gesture of desperation; "my life is bound up in his!"

"Enough!" he answered, clinching his teeth beneath his thick moustache with a spasm of vindictive hate; "the die is cast. I will leave you to do my own business. It is too late now to trust the slackness of a servant."

He took up the letter, and moved towards the door. As he expected, she again intercepted him.

"Destroy the letter," she said, in a voice strained and unnatural, "and repeat your promise that you will cease to molest him now and for ever."

He did not respond at once: he had to regulate the rush of almost overwhelming feeling. Then he answered, quietly,—

"So let it be. I will trust your honor, Sybil Karslake."

He approached the fire and threw the letter into it.

"What am I to do next?" she asked, almost wildly. "Will you bind yourself by some oath? will you require one from me? I shall not give it. My pledge can go no further than this, that I leave him now to save him from a dishonor worse than death, but that I cannot depend upon myself. I am not strong enough to bear self-inflicted pain as he does, and if my misery is too much for me I shall go back."

"The bargain is conditional," he said, coldly. "Go back if you will, and you know the result. The fact of your having left him at all will be so much additional evidence against him. But stay! where are you going now?" he asked, as she turned from him as if with the intention of leaving the room.

"Home!" she replied, sternly. "Did you imagine I should consent never to see him again?"

"That requires consideration," he said, beginning to pace the room in excitement. "Final embraces, passionate adieus, form no part of my programme. Moreover," turning sharply round and stopping before her, "he will not let you go,—if you tell him. He will prefer to drag you down into the slough of his own disgrace."

"No," she replied, with a brave effort to conquer herself and speak calmly, "he would not let me go, therefore he must not know that I am going."

She stood in deep reflection for a few moments, then lifted her stricken face with a proud composure which moved him to the depths of his being.

"I will tell him nothing: he does not know I am here. We will meet and part as usual until to-morrow. He will go to the meeting, braced to meet you there, and will find that his good name is still spared to him. Before his return I will leave the house."

She turned from him and went out into the hall. Sara came forward to meet her, and tried to draw her back into her own room, but in vain. She was frightened at the aspect of her face and the desperate calmness of her manner.

"Will you not tell me what has passed?" she asked.

"I cannot. Ask him. Kiss me; you have been very kind to me."

"You shall not go home alone, my dear. Wait just two minutes, and I will have on my cloak and bonnet. I could not sleep if I did not see you safe under your own roof."

Sybil shuddered involuntarily. "I can wait," she said, mechanically, and stood in the same spot, passive and motionless, with arrested sensation, till her friend joined her.

Not a word was spoken during the brief journey; the fog had lifted, a few stars gleamed in the sky, but had there been portents in heaven Mrs. Karslake would not have seen them. She parted from Sara a few paces from her own door.

"Do not go any farther!" she urged, and the other forbore to dispute the point, and left her but half-satisfied, for she had not seen her safe under her own roof after all.

Sybil walked round swiftly and silently to the side-entrance, which she had left ajar on leaving the house. To her relief, it yielded at once to her hand, and she effected her return, as she had done her departure, without observation. The servants were supping solemnly with closed doors; she heard the sound of her brothers' cheerful voices in the dining-room as she sped up-stairs; probably they had not left it all the time.

All the time! How long was it?

She had now reached the shelter of her dressing-room, but before looking at her watch she took off and put away carefully the hat and cloak she had worn.

She had been absent an hour and a half. It seemed to her, as she stood there in her blank, unutterable misery, a cycle of torture.

At least, it had been long enough to wreck her life.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE boys went to bed that night without seeing their sister. They thought she was working with Julian at the accounts in the library, and contented themselves with singing a cheery good-night outside the door, to which, however, he only responded.

Sybil was lying face downwards on her bed, prostrate with misery, passively suffering the waters of her affliction to flow over her. She could not think, I was going to say she could not pray; but surely the extreme sacrifice she was offering, the speechless appeal of her breaking heart to some power outside her own weakness, partook of the nature of prayer.

She had no interruption to provide against. Julian was going to spend the night down-stairs, but would he not expect to see her again and bid her good-night? If he did, it was impossible. All her secret would escape her at the first tones of his voice, even if her face, marred with tears and uncontrollable emotion, did not disclose it in advance. All she could hope was that the hours would bring some degree of calmness and courage, and then, as it drew towards morning, she would bathe and change her dress and go down to him. But the hours of the night passed, and the anguish of the unhappy wife seemed to augment rather than to slacken.

Thought and memory were hard at work in the torture-chamber of her brain. She found herself recalling every incident in connection with her husband, from the first casual meeting in the village street, when she remembered she had involuntarily turned to look a second time at the most beautiful face she ever remembered to have seen, to the last glance she had taken of him that evening. The incidents of their singular courtship, her own reluctance and coldness, his strength and sweetness, that had so slowly won their way, and his unlimited goodness to her family, came back in vivid detail. And since? What tenderness could have been more perfect, what courage and constancy greater than his in all the troubled relations of the past?

Well, here at least she could emulate him. He was willing to sacrifice his honor to his honor,—his integrity to his integrity,—even to take the ruin of his life rather than forego what he held to be his bounden duty. And she, was not she making an equal, nay, a costlier sacrifice?

At twenty years of age she was offering up the spring and blossom of her life in order that shame might not touch him. What more was possible to saint or martyr? What, indeed, were mere physical tortures to the long agony that stretched before her? And then—the crowning pity of it!—she was at the same time inflicting as much as she spared. And so the night wore on in paroxysms of speechless pain.

At length she heard the clock strike six. The darkness at that hour was, of course, still absolute, but it told her how few hours were left of those she was free to spend with him. She rose from her couch of anguish, bathed in ice-cold water as her custom was, changed her dress, and, by the light of the candle she held, examined her looks with melancholy solicitude. She had never seen herself look so ill and changed. But what did it matter? he would scarcely expect a cheerful face. Still, she spent a few minutes in putting appliances to her aching eyes and head, and then sat for another quarter of an hour motionless in her chair, heedless of cold, to give them time to take effect. She would have sat longer, but her strained ears caught the sound of the quiet opening of the library door. He was probably coming up-stairs: she must go and meet him. She went out, and stood at the head of the stairs to receive him.

"You were going to your room to lie down till breakfast-time?" she asked, in a voice that sounded to her own ears of an unnatural quietness, and with a feeling little short of despair at her heart, lest such should indeed be his intention, and she be deprived of just so much of their brief companionship.

He held a lamp in his hand, which irradiated his face while her own remained in deep shadow; but she saw with an involuntary pang how much of his habitual aspect he had *recovered.*

"Oh, no," he answered. "I feel no need of sleep. I am simply going to my dressing-room. But why have you begun the day so early? and,"—coming close to her and touching her hand,—"my sweetest girl, how pale and ill you look! Have you been sitting up, too, wearing out your heart for me? Remember, Sybil, that is about the only reproach I cannot bear: that cuts at the very root of my courage. You are cold too: go down-stairs, there is still a good fire in the library,—you make me ashamed of the comfort I have enjoyed,—and I will join you in half an hour."

He would have returned with her, but she objected.

"There is no need: it would be losing time. Only make haste!" she said. She went down alone, he standing to light her way till she had entered the room below and closed the door. She stood still in the centre of the floor, and looked about her with nervous eagerness. She wanted to see if she could discover how he had spent the night.

The soft astral lamp was still burning, and the fire fairly good; the writing-table had much the same appearance as when she saw it last the evening before; the accounts that wanted attention were still untouched: he had evidently not done much work. There was a little old-fashioned Latin copy of the "Imitation" of Thomas à Kempis in the chair where he usually sat. She took this up, straining it with both hands against her lips, and then slipped it into her pocket. She went up to the couch where he had lain, and leaned her cheek on the pillow, but she felt the convulsive sobs rising in her throat. Such self-indulgence would be his ruin!

Then it occurred to her that he must be faint with mental exhaustion and hunger, having scarcely tasted food the day before. The servants would not be up for another hour. She would prepare some coffee with her own hands. Since she was married she had never had the pleasure of serving him,—that privilege was reserved for hirelings,—but now here was her opportunity! The idea for the moment banished her despair.

The coffee itself was generally made in a French *cafetière*, so perfect in construction as to leave little to the skill of the cook; but there was the canister to seek in the housekeeper's closet, and the kettle to fill. Her trembling fear was that she would find the receptacle locked, as it doubtless ought to have been; but the best of servants are not infallible, and she blessed the good woman for her happy negligence as she felt the door yield to her touch. In the same place she discovered some tea-cakes and butter, perhaps intended for private consumption, but she carried them off with her, with almost a glow of pleasure, as well as the dainty copper kettle, already considerately filled, which Mrs. Norris never suffered to leave her own apartment.

When Karslake came down, refreshed by his bath and change of dress, and full of quiet strength of mind and purpose, there was an embroidered cloth on a tiny Chippendale table, spread with all the usual appliances for breakfast, and Sybil, kneeling on the rug before the fire, was picking up the cinders from the hearth with discriminating fingers, and dropping them with anxious attention into the cavities of the fire.

"There is no more coal," she said, looking back towards him as he entered, "and the kettle will not boil! Do not be shocked. I have often done this at Ashlands: we did not waste cinders there."

It was an unfortunate allusion: her voice choked in sobs.

He went up to her and bent over her.

"You break my heart, Sybil," he said. "I reproach myself that you have suffered alone last night."

For reply she turned and kissed him, with a lingering passionateness alien to her general manifestations, and very hard for him to bear with equanimity. Her mood perplexed and troubled him.

"May I help you?" he asked, presently, as he saw her preparing to lift the now boiling kettle with her delicate hands: "surely that is too heavy!"

"You little understand what duties I fulfilled in the old times at home," she answered, with a desperate effort to rally her firmness. "We should have considered this an elegant toy then and there, and it is my wish to wait upon you this morning to the minutest point. No! do not rise. I will bring it to you when it is ready. Is not the aroma reviving, and are not you faint for want of food?"

She spoke rapidly and constantly, fearing to be silent lest her emotion should conquer her again, and trying to concentrate her attention upon inducing him to eat and drink in a measure proportioned to her impression of his necessities. He was soon satisfied, however, and she only sipped and could scarcely swallow her cup of coffee. Strong emotion, and especially restrained emotion, is not conducive to appetite.

Then he proposed they should go through the accounts together.

"There is some hours' work to be done," he said, "and I shall not be able to get through it alone. I thought of doing it last night, and half expected you would have come in and offered to help me; but you were quite right to stay with the boys. They need know nothing of to-day's business, Sybil?"

"No," she answered, in a voice scarcely audible, "they need know nothing."

He looked at her again with distressed anxiety; but now she was drawing her chair to the writing-table, adjusting the drooping lamp, and beginning to look over his papers, but with so little of her usual sweet composure.

"Will the meeting have patience to attend to all these minutiæ," she asked, nervously, "when the excitement will run so high on your personal affairs, Julian?"

"All these formalities will be settled first, or, whether they are or not, they must at least be in a condition to bear the strictest investigation."

"I understand," she answered, with her tender smile. "Trust me, I will make no mistakes."

They worked together for a couple of hours without interruption; her mind was now absorbed in her task. It was the last service she would probably perform for him, and if the strain upon taxed brain and opposed inclination had been greater she would have been equal to its exercise. Long before they had finished, the house grew full of light and movement; the servants were moving to and fro in their allotted functions; the boys rushed down-stairs and begged for admittance, and then there was the inevitable adjournment for breakfast.

Sybil sat behind her urn and distributed the cups, but more than this she could not do, pleading a violent headache.

She left Karslake to cover her mental prostration by engaging her brothers' attention in the discussion of which of several plans was the best for their amusement in the day before them, but she perceived at the same time his unrelaxed solicitude for herself. The drawn look of suffering upon her face was greater than any ordinary physical pain could have produced. He little knew that the one cry of her soul, as she followed his every word, glance, or gesture, took the form of the hopeless wail, "The last time! the last time!"

When the meal was over, and Jack and Tom had gone out on some boyish business of their own, he asked her to come back to the library, now duly swept and garnished, with fire cheerfully replenished, and all traces of irregular uses removed.

"You must do no more work, Sybil, beloved!" he said. "I was to blame to suffer it before breakfast; but if you will lie down on the sofa while I write, I shall at least have the sweet comfort of your presence."

She acquiesced. It was the best thing she could desire to lie and look at him till her weary eyes drooped with the tension of her gaze, while he worked on unconscious, or seemingly unconscious, of her fixed regard.

After a time he brought his task to a conclusion, rolled up his papers, and, rising from his seat, looked at his watch.

"It is eleven o'clock," he said, coming up to her: "in another hour I must be in St. Mark's vestry-hall. Sybil, is it the dread of what may happen there that distresses you so much?"

"In another hour?" she repeated.

"Are you afraid," he continued, sitting down beside her, and taking one of the feverish little hands, that lay outside the soft crimson blanket that covered her,—"are you afraid that I shall lose my self-command under Mr. Helstone's provocations, or succumb to the adverse feeling he may excite against me? I trust in God I shall do neither! Besides, I have the stimulus of your faith, and shall have the consolation of your sympathy."

Sybil could scarcely repress a sob of agony. The sickness of her heart, the terrible demand upon her self-repression, made her physically faint, only she would not have lost the consciousness of his sweet presence for a moment. She raised herself from her recumbent posture, and, passing her arm round his neck, leaned her throbbing temples upon his breast. He drew her closer, with intense but restrained tenderness.

"I know well," he said, gently, "that you think I am *committing* an error of judgment,—sacrificing our united interests to some exaggerated notion of honor, perhaps to some disguised form of pride. Sybil, I have spent the hours of the night in as rigid an examination of conflicting motives and duties as I am capable of, and I am calmly confident I am doing right. Only it would be an additional help and comfort if I could win your approval as well."

Her only answer was a passionate pressure of the hand she held. What could she say, poor suffering soul?

"Will you go to your room, and try and sleep away your pain as soon as I am gone?" he asked, presently. "Let me carry you up-stairs. I had thought of taking half an hour's walk before I go into the hall."

"Oh, do not go!" she rather breathed than spoke. "My head aches too much for change of place: let me stay here!"

He drew her closer in his arms and stroked her bowed head caressingly. She was so quiet he almost thought she slept, while every faculty and sensation were stretched on the rack of endurance. She was counting the tickings of the clock with almost delirious anxiety. At length the quarter to the hour chimed.

"I must leave you now," he said, putting her gently from him: "it would not do to be late."

He rose as he spoke, and she rose too, moved she hardly knew by what impulse. He took both her hands in his, and kissed her quietly on the forehead, his great desire being to soothe the intense excitement under which he saw she was laboring.

"My darling, I shall probably not be two hours absent."

A spasm passed over her white, set face. Then, with a great effort, she commanded her voice enough to speak.

"Have I ever vexed you, Julian, or disappointed or grieved you in any way, since we were married? If I have, say you forgive me!"

He looked distressed. "Never! You have been the sweetest and most loyal of wives as well as the most beloved. Rather it is for me to ask that question."

She turned her eyes away from him with a long shuddering sigh, but still keeping her hold upon his hands.

"You are impatient to be gone," she said, "and I will not keep you any longer. Kiss me once more, Julian, and then go, while I have strength to give you leave to go."

CHAPTER XXIX.

LIFE is full of pathetic suggestions, and among the most significant is the apparent waste of human power and effort. The trial that overwhelms us is precisely that special misfortune which we never expected or provided against; the blow that crushes us is dealt from some quarter where our confidence was most implicit. We spend our strength in fortifying our souls against some supreme loss or evil, the anticipation of which clouds half a lifetime perhaps, and the shadow passes over and touches us not. There are hundreds of men and women who sap the healthy springs of existence by corroding anxieties respecting events which never become part of their actual experience.

For the most part, blessing or cursing, the rapture of fruition or the bitter pain of frustration, comes upon us unawares, or in some guise so different from what we expected that we have not the faculty to recognize it. In brief, "it is always the unforeseen that happens."

Some such reflections as these occupied the mind of Julian Karslake as he walked down the steps of St. Mark's vestry-hall, surrounded by cordial friends and pleasant greetings, at the close of the meeting for which he had braced his powers of endurance to the uttermost. He had been prepared, at the cost of severe mental conflict, to meet one of the most cruel emergencies of life, and no such emergency had occurred.

The meeting had been large and specially pervaded by a genial New Year influence. The ordinary business was gone through with less friction than usual, the quiet tact and courtesy of the rector unconsciously emitting rays of irresistible influence.

No one could have guessed, who marked the unruffled patience with which he expounded the minute and tedious matters of business under discussion, and submitted to the frequent interruptions and contradictions with which statement and suggestion were encountered, that an almost intolerable anxiety was gnawing at his heart,—no one, at least, who was not a very keen physiognomist.

But time went on: accounts were duly examined and passed, resolutions of the narrowest parochial interest proposed and seconded,—among them the vote of thanks to himself,—but still his enemy did not appear. What could it mean?

Had he, after all, relented at the eleventh hour, his better nature getting the mastery? Or was it the result of some unforeseen accident, or a deliberate snare to cheat him into false security?

At least it was a reprieve, for which he thanked God devoutly; not so much for his own deliverance as for the joy and comfort it was now in his power to take back to the beloved, suffering wife at home.

As soon as he could civilly shake himself free from his friends, he walked home at a rapid pace. The two hours' absence he had mentioned as the term of the meeting had been considerably extended, and the unusual excitement and prostration of Sybil had filled him with a vague and depressing apprehension.

As he came within sight of his own house he saw Jack and Tom standing in the open door-way. As soon as they recognized him they rushed down the steps to meet him.

"We are only just come in," said Jack, "and we found the morning performance at the Gayety very flat after Covent Garden last night: we did not stop to the end. We were on the lookout for you, not knowing what to do with ourselves. We wondered to find Sybil gone out, when she seemed quite ill this morning. Of course she will be back to dinner?"

"Sybil out!" repeated Julian, in a tone of stupefaction; but even as he spoke a sense of some immeasurable calamity swept over his mind. Was the explanation already awaiting him of her profound emotion and Gilbert Helstone's failure of execution? As was habitual to him, he succeeded in maintaining his outward composure.

"You are only just come home," he said to the boys, "and cannot have made sure she is not there."

They were quite sure; they had gone into every room of the house to look for her.

He went into the house without another word, entered the library, and looked round for some hint of explanation. There was none, unless it were the crimson coverlet which lay in a *heap on the floor.* He searched the writing-table to see if there were any letter or written scrap of paper in her handwriting, but found nothing. Then, suddenly catching sight of his own white face and distended eyes in a glass, a reaction of feeling occurred. Why was he mad enough to give way to this nameless and intolerable dread, when perhaps the simplest explanation was at hand? Sybil's panacea for a headache was the open air: she had probably gone out for a walk or drive. He rang the bell to question the servants, but even as he thus tried to reassure himself the same deep-rooted misgiving mocked his efforts.

The man who answered the bell replied that Mrs. Karslake had gone out about an hour or so after the master himself, but he was not in the house at the time, and he thought the parlor-maid could give further particulars. It was evident to Karslake that he spoke with reluctance, and he was conscious of an expression of intelligent sympathy in the man's face, that brought back the sensitive color into his own.

The girl who also acted occasionally as Sybil's maid was then called: she was bursting with anxiety to tell her story.

A letter, she said, had been brought to Mrs. Karslake almost immediately after his own departure. She had taken it into the library herself, and her mistress was then lying on the sofa. She told her to put it down on the table, not knowing that an answer was expected; but when she understood the messenger was waiting she bade the servant leave the room, and she would ring when she was ready. It was a very long time indeed, perhaps half an hour, before the bell was rung: when she went in again the letter was lying on the table in a sealed envelope but without any address. She did not see Mrs. Karslake's face at all, for she was lying on the sofa with her head turned to the wall and buried in the pillow. She took out the letter and gave it to the messenger; she did not know who he was, or where he came from.

Presently she heard her mistress go up-stairs, and then her dressing-room bell rang. She told her she was suddenly called away from home, and ordered her to pack a small tin travelling-case with necessary clothes. She thought she understood her to say for a month's absence, but was not quite sure and did not like to ask any questions. Mrs. Karslake would only let her put in a few of her plainest dresses and no ornaments of any kind: she was not crying, but dreadfully white and still.

When the box was ready it was taken down into the hall, and almost at the same moment a cab drove up to the door: there was no one in the cab. Then Mrs. Karslake came downstairs, dressed for a journey; she went into the library again and stayed there a little while, perhaps ten minutes. Then she came out, said "good-by" in a very faint voice to her and the man-servant in attendance, got into the cab, and was driven away. She knew nothing more.

"What orders were given to the cabman?" asked Karslake, in a voice calm indeed, but so strained and unnatural as to be scarcely recognizable.

Mrs. Karslake had said no orders were required; the man knew where to go.

"And she left no letter,—no message?"

"None," she answered, and then the girl burst out crying, and Karslake motioned to them to leave the room.

But he was not to be allowed the privilege of solitude at present. The moment the servants had left the room the boys knocked for admission, and there was no alternative but to bid them come in. The sight of their pale, scared faces was another pang: what was he to say to them?

Jack was generally spokesman.

"We want to know where Sybil is?" and there was a touch of sullenness and suspicion in his manner. "You must know all about it, and where she is gone! What is wrong all on a sudden, and why was the girl crying?"

"It is very natural that you should think I must know all about it, but the fact is I am as much taken by surprise as you in not finding her at home on my return. At present I cannot discuss the matter, and must ask you to leave me alone for a little while, that I may be able to think it out by myself."

The boys looked at each other as if for encouragement. Then Tom spoke:

"We fancy it is something to do with what she saw at Covent Garden that night: don't you know of anything that made her unhappy?"

He hesitated: it was hard to run this childish gauntlet.

"I cannot answer you, Tom. I am not able to talk it over with you now."

He went to the door and opened it for their departure.

"You must understand that I am in trouble and want to be alone. When dinner is ready, sit down and manage by yourselves: don't wait for me."

Whatever the acuteness of his mental suffering, he did not betray it by symptoms open to the boys' penetration. They could not read aright the lines of strained endurance in his face, but they could remark that the voice in which he spoke was clear and steady, and it raised a spirit of resistance in Tom's mind.

"If I were a man instead of a boy you would be obliged to discuss the matter with me! But father will want to understand."

To this Karslake made no reply: he still stood with the door in his hand, as if waiting to shut them out. They felt there was nothing else to be done but to go, and they walked slowly past him with sullen averted faces.

Then for a few moments he stood still in the same spot, and involuntarily raised his hands to his head, which throbbed now with physical pain. If ever a man saw himself standing alone and desolate in life, with all his household hopes shattered around him, it was he; and for a time he felt he must hold thought in suspense lest he should not have the courage to face his necessity. Presently his eyes fell on the little table that had been pushed on one side, so cruelly suggestive of the incidents of the early morning, and on the couch where she had lain, and he felt impelled to fling himself prone on the latter and surrender his manhood in tears, without further conflict of repression; but he did not yield to the impulse. The coercion of duty and self-control becomes in a sense mechanical over minds pledged to constant obedience; and Karslake walked slowly back to the fire and sat down in his accustomed chair to think over what was next and wisest to be done. No slightest doubt of his wife's honor or his wife's devotion passed through his mind; rather he dimly guessed at once there must be some connection between her absence and Helstone's discarded vengeance. What perplexed him was how and when they had communicated with each other since his own visit to the Temple the day before.

All the pathetic tenderness and intense agitation of the morning were to be fully explained, on the supposition that she had then decided on her sacrificial act of desertion. But what means had she employed to let their enemy know that she was willing to pay the redemption-price demanded? Another thought occurred. What must be the relentless nature of the man who could extort from the magnanimous devotion of a wife such a supreme sacrifice? But he turned deliberately from the latter consideration: it was unwise to fan into a flame the natural fires of hate and vengeance; rather would he fortify his mind with the thought of the divine unselfishness of Sybil's love. There was consolation and incentive to patience and endurance in the future in this alone, and, for the rest, of course he would win her back to him; that result was only a question of time. He would prove to her conclusively that the disgrace she averted was but a fictitious shame, not for a moment to be weighed in the balance against the solace of her love, and that, even if the humiliation had been absolute, they were bound, by the sacred obligation of their marriage vows, to stand by each other through good and evil fortune.

Then it occurred to him he did not know for certain how Sybil had passed the preceding evening after she had left him, and that he had felt a measure of surprise at her absenting herself through the entire length of it. At least on this point her brothers could inform him, and he left the room at once to find and question them.

Dinner was cleared away, and there was some dessert on the table; but neither Jack nor Tom had touched it. They were sitting both together in a roomy lounging-chair pulled close to the hot fire, with their arms round each other, in the loose embrace which was an habitual attitude with them, and their voices dropped in low, earnest talk. They looked up in rather a shame-faced fashion as Karslake entered. In answer to his inquiries as to whether Sybil had spent the whole of the preceding evening in their company, he received of course an emphatic negative.

"We thought she was with you in the library," said Jack. "She went in there after dinner, and we never saw her again till breakfast-time this morning."

It was becoming abundantly clear to his mind. She had gone to make a last appeal to Gilbert Helstone, and had accepted his terms of deliverance; and he himself—absorbed in what now seemed to him a selfish preoccupation—had suffered her to pass the hours of her struggle and anguish alone,—at what a cost had been sufficiently indicated by her manner and appearance that morning. Surely he must have been blind and insensible not to have read those signs aright! The momentous question was, What had become of her? what place of refuge or plan of concealment had been dictated to her? He would go and see Helstone at once, and compel him to give up what information was in his power.

CHAPTER XXX.

He went out of the house without telling the boys where he was going, and equally without any consideration of the pain and humiliation to which he might be subjected. To find some degree of rest in ceaseless movement was the natural craving of his present mood: repose, either of body or mind, seemed impossible under the pressure of his cruel distress.

It was much the same hour and same weather—fog and drizzling rain—as on the preceding night, when Sybil had turned her steps in the same direction; and in like manner, on hearing the sound of his inquiries in the hall, Sara Helstone opened the door of the room where she was sitting, and came out to speak to him. In his case, however, there was no friendly recognition or welcome.

She dismissed the servant with a gesture before she opened her lips, and even then she looked at him for a few moments in silence, with an expression at once eager and dissatisfied. A sudden breathless hope glanced across his mind.

"Is my wife—is Sybil here?" he gasped.

Sara gave a short laugh. "Come in here with me," she said, "if I must speak to you, which I would much rather not. Do not let any one hear the sound of your voice."

He followed her into the room, she closing the door carefully behind them with a preoccupied and restless manner. She seemed to bring her mind with difficulty to the subject before her, and he was obliged to repeat his inquiry ere she seemed fully to follow his meaning.

"Sybil!" she said, vaguely, at last: "she was here last night and I walked home with her. I know nothing since."

"You did not know she had left my house this morning?"

There was something in his tone and manner that at length had the effect of arresting her attention; she brought her gaze to bear consciously upon him, and her face softened a little.

"I will not tell you a lie," she answered; "so much as that I know; but where she is now, or what led her to take such a step, I do not. But you, I presume, have not to go very far for the solution of the mystery?"

"The solution of the mystery is a man's thirst for mistaken vengeance and a woman's power of sacrificing love."

"So be it!" she answered, with renewed impatience. "I have neither time nor inclination just now to discuss this point. I tell you again I have no information to give you, and just now my mind is so harassed by private anxiety that you will pardon my telling you plainly I should like to be alone. To-morrow, perhaps, when my brother is in town, if it will be any satisfaction to you to see me again, I shall be more at liberty."

He turned to depart at once, then stopped.

"I will intrude no longer on you, but if Mr. Helstone is at home I cannot leave the house without seeing him. You must understand that my suspense is almost more than I can bear."

"You cannot by any possibility see Gilbert to-night, and on my honor he could not relieve your anxiety. He knows no more than myself where Mrs. Karslake is."

Her eagerness to be quit of his presence was so overmastering that she even laid her hand on his arm to urge his departure: there was no resource but to yield. He took up his hat and went out into the hall, Sara following him in anxious attendance; but before he had reached the street door there was a sudden rush of confused tempestuous sound from the upper stories of the house. Sara's face blanched to deadly pallor: he instinctively stood still.

"What is that?" he demanded, scarcely able to analyze the impression produced.

Before she could answer, a door from above burst open, and a *woman appeared* on the head of the stairs, leaning breathlessly over the balusters to the hall below, and beckoning for help with a restrained but imperative gesture. Scarcely considering what he did, Karslake sprang up the stairs to her side.

"What is wrong? can I be of use?" he asked.

The woman, who had a powerful frame and arm of iron, glanced at him for a moment with keen doubtful scrutiny, but her movements, though heavy, were prompt and decisive.

"At least you can try," she answered, in a harsh guttural voice, retreating rapidly as she spoke towards the door she had just quitted, and whence issued sounds of inarticulate fury.

"We want help," she continued; "go in and do your best: for God's sake part them if you can, before murder is done! A strange face and voice may divert her attention. I am no longer of any use."

Karslake followed her without question or hesitation. The room he entered was dimly lighted by a lamp hung close to the ceiling, and the rays of which were further absorbed by the gloomy padded walls and thick dark carpet on the floor. Directly beneath the rays of this lamp, so as to bring their features and figures into ghastly relief, a man and woman were locked together in what was evidently a mortal struggle. The woman was tall and spare in form, but one glance was enough to see that the convulsive clutch with which she grasped the other's throat was the irresistible strength of madness. Her long gray tresses of hair, still abundant, floated over her shoulders, and the lines of her face and the tones of her voice were inflamed with irresponsible fury, as she succeeded in straitening her suffocating hold in spite of the powerful resistance of her victim.

It was a sickening spectacle, Helstone's livid face and distended eyes showing the extremity of his condition.

The situation, which takes time to describe, was instantaneously apprehended by Karslake. He perceived at a glance that any attempt to tear the maniac from her prey must fail fatally, and with a swift movement he advanced in front of her, so as to stand in the full focus of her raised vision, and, rolling up the handkerchief he held in his hand, threw it suddenly, and with all the force of which the action admitted, *into* her face.

As he expected, with a cry of brutal rage she released her hold of Helstone, and precipitated herself upon him. But he was not only prepared for the attack, but had all the nerve and training of a young English athlete, also the advantage of considerably greater height. He succeeded in evading the snatch of her desperate fingers, the keeper at the same time rushing forward to secure her patient, but not before the mad woman had, by an unexpected movement, seized his hand and bitten it through to the bone.

Karslake stooped to pick up his handkerchief, in order to wrap it round the wound, partly also to hide the involuntary contraction of pain. As he rose he met Helstone's eyes fixed upon him with an expression difficult to define, but in which gratitude or recognition obviously had no part.

"Let us go," he said, hoarsely, rising with difficulty from the chair into which he had fallen; "the paroxysm is over: she will be able to manage her now."

The struggle had been an exhausting one. He staggered a little as he turned, and tried to walk with his usual independence of gait and gesture.

Karslake came up to him and offered his arm.

"Forget that we are enemies," he said; "at least, till I have seen you safe under your sister's care."

Helstone's face turned deadly pale. "This is too much," he said: "my punishment is greater than I can bear. I would rather have lost my life than have owed it to you. I can manage without help."

Outside the door, which the nurse had forcibly locked against her, stood Sara leaning against the wall. She drew a deep gasping sigh as she recognized her brother's safety, but an imperative movement on his part seemed to check the words she would have spoken.

Helstone slowly led the way down-stairs, and then turned into the dining-room. "I must speak to Julian Karslake alone," he said, and Sara withdrew in silence to her room opposite.

The wine still stood on the table. He went up to it, half filled a tumbler, and drained it to the bottom.

"Will you drink?" he asked, but Karslake shook his head.

"You will not drink nor sit in my house," resumed Helstone, in the same tone of bitter cynicism as before, "but for all that I must detain you for a moment. You must promise me to keep the miserable secret that circumstances have revealed to you to-night. My honor is pledged to keep that desperate woman under my own roof: you will not betray me?"

"No, I will not betray you."

"One word more. I freely own I owe my life to your courage and self-possession, qualities in which I never thought you deficient; but I can profess no gratitude. It is a pain deeper than words can tell, that you should have seen what you have seen to-night and laid me under this obligation. If you know human nature, you will easily understand that I love you none the better for it. You do not think to buy off my enmity thus?"

"My action was without calculation or any recognition of your own personality: there is no question of obligation between us. Shall we consider that point settled? I have something to say in my turn."

He leaned heavily against the table as he spoke. The suspended rush of his own anguish, added to the strain of protracted physical and mental exhaustion, and the renewed necessity of self-repression in the presence of his heartless foe, seemed almost beyond his strength. Helstone sat and watched him with relentless scrutiny, with which a sense of unwilling admiration slowly mingled.

"You are sick with pain," he said, rising and pouring out a glass of water, "though I own you have borne it well. I know of old she has the fangs of a tigress. Drink this! No? As you please; but it is a pity to balk the first movement of charity I ever felt in your behalf."

"It is a greater pity, I think," replied Karslake, coldly, "to waste time by the wearisome iteration of your sentiments towards myself. I came here to-night to ask you what has become of my wife, and I will not go away without an answer."

"Oh, you shall have your answer!—I do not know. I have not the slightest clue to her present whereabouts. You do not believe me? In that case, both for your sake and my own, we will end the interview."

He rose as he spoke, as if to intimate his intention of leaving the room, but Karslake intercepted him.

"I know she came to you last night, to speak in my behalf, and I conclude you forced her to this desperate alternative by working upon her feeling in a way that your knowledge of her character would well fit you to do. But the practical details of her secret departure were never arranged by herself, and I come to you for the information that no one else can give."

"We often come for what we cannot get," was the sneering reply, "and in this case, had I the best will in the world, I could not help you. Not that I would help you if I could! Your love for your wife has much of the shamelessness of your love for your mistress; you would keep her at any cost of dishonor. But such is not her way of looking at things: she decided of her own free will to leave you. Love without respect was impossible to Sybil Dorrimore. Have I not told you I would encourage her to bear misery rather than shame? Well, I have fulfilled my threat, and broken the cursed bond between you."

Karslake was silent for a few moments. Then he said,—

"The one object I had in view in coming here to-night is lost, if I am to believe what you say; and for the rest, I am constitutionally fortified against abusive language, and am not tempted to unburden my mind of my personal sentiments, as you are. Equally do I refuse to dispute your explanation of the motives that have influenced Mrs. Karslake. Enough that, even in the first keenness of my loss, I can find some comfort in the thought of the loving magnanimity which has inflicted it: your vindictiveness, after all, can only go a certain length."

"Have you done?" interrupted Helstone. "I forbear to reply or threaten, for your wife has purchased future immunity for you so long as she keeps, as she probably will keep, her part of the bond. Shall I suggest that you should go home, if such a word is any longer applicable to St. Mark's Rectory? If you feel no necessity for pulling yourself together after the events of the night, I do."

He laid his hand on the bell. The events of the night, Karslake's invincible self-command under provocation, his own repeated failure to provoke him to protest or recrimination or to humble him to admission or complaint, only served as a stimulus to his malice and hatred, and exasperated him almost beyond observing the decency of social restraints. And now to be added to the score were the unpayable service he had rendered him; and a corroding anxiety he could not bring himself to express. He had a morbid dread of discovery and interference with the miserable secret of his household, but when Karslake got home would he not summon doctor or servant to dress his lacerated and ignoble wound, and by so doing provoke inquiry and speculation? Must he stoop to solicitation on this point?

Julian had turned already to depart.

"It is unnecessary to ring the bell," he said, in reply to his host's doubtful courtesy: "I shall prefer to dismiss myself."

Helstone followed him into the hall.

"One more word," he said, in the harsh, reluctant accents of a man who speaks against the grain. "I am scarcely brute enough to let you leave the house without acknowledging again the debt I owe you. It will make no difference in our relations,—understand that clearly,—but it exists. Another, my sister is an excellent surgeon; will you not let her see your hurt and prescribe for it before you go? Your servant or doctor might ask questions that would compromise your pledge."

"I can keep a pledge, even under difficulties," replied Karslake, coldly. "Do not be uneasy; it is the left hand; there will be no need of assistance; no one shall see it but myself. Good-night."

CHAPTER XXXI.

Karslake was quite correct in thinking that Sybil had not arranged the details of her departure herself. The letter the maid-servant witnessed to her having received was from Helstone, suggesting the best steps to take to secure the secrecy of her movements, and making her acquainted with the arrangements he had already made in her behalf. He proposed that she should drive in the first instance to the Midland Hotel, and that he should meet her there at a fixed hour in the afternoon, in order to discuss future plans for her guidance and welfare. He added that he would bring his sister with him.

Up to the point of allowing herself to be driven to the hotel named, by the cabman previously tutored by Helstone, Sybil followed the prescribed programme implicitly; but there her docility ceased. The misery she had suffered since she consented to abandon her home had crushed for a time her mental independence and strength, but it was inevitable to a girl of her native force of character that the reaction should not be far off. As she sat in one of the formal and dreary sitting-rooms of the hotel, passively waiting for the hour to strike when she might expect her advisers, a certain degree of composure and rallying-power already came to her.

She shrank with absolute repugnance from a second interview with Helstone. Why should she subject herself to it? Also, what claim had he to know where and under what conditions she led the life he had so cruelly maimed? To be subjected to his discretionary visits and ceaseless observation would be an insufferable bondage, from which pride and self-respect equally revolted. It formed no part of the pledge he had exacted from her: therefore she was free to consult her own quickening desire for perfect independence of action.

Her first natural idea had been that she would go back to her father; but reflection showed her that this was impracticable on many grounds. Helstone would have forbidden it as contrary to the bond; for he not only required separation from her husband, but absolute concealment, and Ashlands could not have afforded that. Also, she could not have endured the complications that would assuredly have arisen in any attempt to make Mr. Dorrimore understand the situation. No: she must not only cut herself off from Julian, but from the strong family ties that had formerly made up the paramount interest of her life.

As she reached this point of conclusion, and saw the dreary waste that her existence would become, her courage almost gave way. She rose up from her seat with a sudden determination to risk all, and return to the blessedness she had forsaken. What, after all, mattered outside estimates of right and merit if they were together? Would not Julian prefer his love to his honor?

But the very phase in which the idea formed itself in her mind brought its own swift confutation with it. Her lips expressed an instant self-scorn for a vacillation so unworthy.

granted that he would, his wife would not prefer it for him. Keenly as she might suffer, it was better than to have his head bowed under the stress of popular indignation, and his career blighted and distorted by unmerited but overwhelming disgrace. Even now, at that hour, the burden he had carried so long had fallen off his shoulders, and he was a free man;—and she had enfranchised him!

A glow of ardor came over her pale cheek, and lighted the fires in her pathetic eyes, as this thought animated her and helped her to calmer practical conclusions.

Instead of waiting for the Helstones and submitting her arrangements to their decision, she would go away at once and conceal her place of abode equally from all.

For a few moments she bent her mind in anxious consideration on the difficulty as to where she should go. That she had very few personal or intimate friends was scarcely to be regretted, for to the friendship of no one could she have appealed in this strait. The object chiefly to be attained—nay, the only object to be attained—was to find shelter in some place where she was least likely to be sought or found. Chance would achieve that for her, perhaps better than arrangement.

It occurred to her, as an act of desirable precaution, not to start on her vague journey from the neighboring station, for Helstone would inevitably trace her movements in that case. She would get the people at the hotel to order a cab for her at once, and break the clue by driving to the Southwestern terminus.

There was no difficulty in carrying this out. Her quiet dress and modest travelling-case, in connection with her sad, sweet face, and also, it may be added, with the very light refreshment she had ordered as a point of form, suggested to the female head of the establishment the idea of her being some young governess going to her situation under the pressure of homesickness.

She got into her cab, and was driven from the hotel without having excited the smallest amount of suspicion or even curiosity in those with whom she had come into contact.

Arrived at Waterloo, she felt a greater feeling of security, owing to the circumstance of her previous familiarity with the station and route. She would travel westward, not stopping *indeed* in the locality of her own beloved home, but below that, to some of the beautiful seaside nooks to be found on the coast of Devon.

But by this time the afternoon was far advanced, and darkness had set in. She was not only physically exhausted, but shrank from the prospect of a night journey by mail-train, which was the only alternative before her. Should she spend the night at the railway hotel, and start on her reluctant exile by the mid-day train on the morrow? No; that she feared to do, lest the ingenuity of Helstone or the despairing love of Karslake should seek and find her, and in the latter case her work would be undone, for she knew she would never have the power to part from him a second time and under the dear coercion of his authority.

Better would it be to put some measure of distance between them before she slept, and by thus again breaking her journey she would render discovery more difficult.

She took her ticket for Esher,—not that she had any knowledge of or predilection for the place, but because an elderly lady of highly-respectable and reserved demeanor preceded her at the office, booking herself for that station, and Sybil desired the protection of her companionship. When at last she found herself sitting opposite to her, in a dingy, imperfectly-lighted first-class carriage, and rushing out of the station into the rain, sleet, and fog of the all-pervading night, she felt she had never realized the extremity of her misery until then.

It was about the dinner-hour at St. Mark's Rectory, but there would be no gathering round the table to-night. Julian was probably seeking her at that moment, and the boys, leaning against each other as they always did when they were in trouble, were exhausting their boyish ingenuity in conjecturing what had become of her. And what conclusions would they reach? what satisfactory explanation could be given them? They would go back to Winchester with a weight on their young spirits, which would hinder the progress they and she had been so anxious to make. Again, was her husband to be burdened for life with the charge of her family, when all that made life sweet to him had been withdrawn? After all, had she judged wisely? was she doing right?

"But that is the question we all ask ourselves in our moments of weakness," she answered herself. "I must rely on the *decision of braver* moods." And she checked the sob in her throat and wiped away the tears that had not fallen, and by this time the train stopped, and "Esher" was being shouted unintelligibly along the line.

She and her travelling companion, who had not once broken silence, got out together, and Sybil followed in her footsteps in a blind mechanical way. It was necessary to cross the line to the gate of egress on the opposite side, and, this accomplished, the necessity of some direct personal action became imperative.

The situation was dreary in the extreme. The rain was now falling fast through a dense mist that blotted out every object at a few yards' distance, while a biting wind swept round the corners of the half-roofed and scantily-lighted station.

In another moment Sybil would be alone in the unknown waste, with the exception of the couple of porters who were stamping up and down the platform to keep their stagnating blood in circulation; for no one but herself and the lady had got out at Esher, and the latter stepped out so briskly that she would soon be beyond her range of vision.

Moved by desperation, Mrs. Karslake took courage to lay her hand timidly on her shoulder, in order to engage her attention.

"Can you tell me if there is a respectable inn near the station?" she asked.

"There is one," replied a cold, guarded voice, out of her manifold wrappings and the mist, "and I have no doubt it is respectable. But are you alone, and without friends in this place?"

"Yes," said Sybil, in a low voice, "and not in this place only."

"And you are a respectable girl?" continued the other; "one, I mean, that a good woman need not be ashamed to befriend?"

Sybil's heart throbbed with complex emotion. "I am that; but—does a good woman only befriend the respectable?"

"Humph! you are quick at retort at least; but I have taken stock of you in the carriage, and I call myself a physiognomist. I will do what ninety-nine women out of a hundred would not do; that is, I will welcome a stranger, of whom *I know nothing*, to bed and board to-night, provided she is *willing to come* home with me."

"Really? You are not mocking me, I mean?"

The inflection of the voice was so suggestive of a gratitude beyond the occasion, that it told its own tale of the mental condition of the speaker and touched a chord in a very guarded but sensitive heart.

"I am quite in earnest. Follow me close; I expect to find my servant with a lantern outside. Prepare for a short walk down a very dirty lane, and our trunks will follow."

Sybil obeyed, walking like one in a dream. Just beyond the station a woman was standing, lantern in hand. She greeted her mistress with respect, quickened by cordiality.

"I have a friend with me to-night, Martha," she said, significantly. "Walk on first, and show us the way carefully. What atrocious weather!"

The walk was short, and the darkness rendered every object invisible. On one side of the road Sybil thought she distinguished the outlines of houses, showing like phantoms through the mist.

Presently the servant stopped before a small iron gate set in a thick box hedge; they went up a narrow garden-path, ascended some stone steps, that gleamed wet and white beneath the rays of the lantern, and soon stood within the shelter of a door with a heavy porch over it.

"Stand well under shelter," said the stranger: "you shall not be kept long waiting in the dark; Martha has to go round to open the door." And the next minute they heard the key turned and bolt withdrawn; the door was flung swiftly open, and the cheering light and warmth of the interior smiled upon them. Sybil was led through the cosey and prettily-furnished hall into a parlor that looked the perfection of homely comfort to the weary, sore-hearted girl. The blaze of a glorious fire, and the soft light of a shaded lamp shed over the spotless cloth of a table laid for tea, were some of the accessories of the cheerful scene.

"My dear, throw off your hat and jacket on the sofa, and we will drink a cup of tea before we go up-stairs. Sit here," pulling a low chair in front of the fire, "and let me introduce myself. My name is Harrison, and I am sole lessee and proprietor of my little demesne: ergo, I am an old maid."

Sybil obeyed in silence, for her heart was too full for speech. The sense of security, the marvellous kindness which had come to meet her so strangely, broke down her strained composure, and she knew if she tried to speak she should burst into tears. She stood in the comparative shade of the corner where the sofa was placed, slowly laying aside her wraps and furs, and striving for self-command.

Miss Harrison paid no apparent attention to her; she was busy in making the tea from the little copper kettle, bright as burnished bronze, which Martha had brought in, and giving instructions for hot toast and ham; also some further orders in a lower key, which did not reach Sybil's ears, in reference to having a good fire in the guest-chamber. But all the same there was not a point of external indication which escaped her keen vision. As Sybil, at length, having no further excuse to linger, came slowly forward and sat down in the chair placed for her, Miss Harrison instinctively marked and appraised every detail of her appearance and costume.

The dark-blue cloth dress, simply made but exquisite in texture, style, and completeness; the embroidered linen which encircled the delicate throat and wrists; the little brooch which fastened her collar, and the chain to which her watch was hung, were recognized as gems of art, the product of the Venetian goldsmith's ancient skill.

It would be in vain to deny that her night of watching and tears, and day of suffering and fatigue, had dimmed the beauty of her face, but the inalienable charm of perfect contour remained untouched, and the pathos of the heavy eyes and drooping mouth did more for her with the woman who was observing her than the softest bloom or brightest grace of expression could have done. Her hands lay folded loosely and weariedly in her lap, and it never occurred to her mind that the thick hoop of gold, which was the only ring she wore, would at once declare to her hostess her position as a wife.

Miss Harrison poured out her fragrant tea into dainty cups of Chelsea china, which most housekeepers would have had on a shelf or in a cabinet; but she liked to utilize her pretty things, and brought one over to where Sybil sat, not suffering her to rise and fetch it for herself.

There was something in the gracious kindness of the action that touched Mrs. Karslake's softened and agitated mind profoundly, as well as recalled to it the incidents of the early morning, so sharply stamped in her memory. It was with an effort she steadied her shaking hand, so as to take a firm hold of the costly cup.

"You are too good to me," she said, in a low tone, that her courage and constancy constrained to firmness. "Your kindness is almost more than I can bear."

"You will find your powers of endurance stronger when you have taken a little food. Be advised, my dear, and try and follow my good example: our troubles always loom bigger when we are faint with hunger and fatigue. After you have eaten a little you shall go up-stairs to your room and rest and wash, and afterwards we will have some talk together, and you shall tell me just so much or so little as you feel disposed. Come."

Sybil obeyed. To show gratitude by obedience was an instinct of her nature; and although, as she watched Miss Harrison placing the daintiest morsels temptingly upon her plate, she felt sure she would not be able to swallow a mouthful, she found she was mistaken. She had scarcely tasted food all day, and her vigorous youth vindicated its natural claims to appetite: she had not known how physically exhausted she was till she felt the reviving influence of her new friend's hospitality.

Miss Harrison watched her with the keenest pleasure. The absence of all affectation, the graceful simplicity of the girl, pleased her abundantly; she chatted discursively to distract her attention while she ate, and felt herself amply rewarded when a faint smile parted the lips of her unknown guest.

After tea she introduced her herself to her pleasant bedchamber, where the same nicety and cheerful warmth prevailed as seemed common to the whole establishment, and left her, with the promise that she would call for her on her way down-stairs in half an hour.

Her travelling-box stood already unstrapped in the room; a little brazen pitcher of classical shape was sending up wreaths of steam from the washing-stand; snowy towels, crimson curtains shutting out the dreary night, an American rocking-chair before the bright fire on the thick-piled rug, gave an aspect of inviting comfort and friendly welcome to the scene.

Sybil looked about her with eyes wet with chastened feeling. Would that Julian could know how circumstances had tempered the severity of her distress! Julian! would he not look beyond circumstance, and attribute the mercy she had found to that supreme Director whom he so silently but persistently recognized and served? Ah! would he find his religious faith adequate in this crisis to his own consolation?

A tender smile played round her mouth; she sat down in the tempting chair by the fireside, and, drawing out of her pocket the little book she had taken out of his chair that morning, found some faint sense of relief by holding it in her caressing hands, pressing it against her bosom, or laying her yearning lips upon its worn covers. It did not occur to her to open and read: what soothing power it had lay in the fact that it had been carried near the heart, and daily handled by the touch, from which she was so cruelly divorced.

The sound of her hostess's quick movements in the passage outside startled her from this mood of self-indulgence.

"I shall call for you in ten minutes," she cried, cheerily, as she passed her door; and by that time Sybil was ready to accompany her down-stairs.

Miss Harrison placed herself in a huge easy-chair close to the fire, and, taking up a black silk stocking she was knitting, motioned to Sybil to take the seat opposite her.

"Sit down, my dear. I always go to bed at ten o'clock, and it is now precisely nine: that gives us a full hour for improving our acquaintance. You will not object to my asking you a few questions: it will be the easiest way of satisfying my own mind,—and you are not bound to answer them."

"But if I refuse to answer them you will doubt my respectability!"

"Did I not tell you I was a physiognomist? And I read a candor in your face that fixed my interest far more than its claims to beauty. Shall I tell you my hypothesis in regard to your situation? You are a young wife, possibly deeply attached to your husband, and you are leaving him because you think it your duty to do so."

"Yes," was the answer, in a low voice; "that is precisely the case."

Miss Harrison lowered her knitting-needles and fixed her keen gaze on the speaker.

"I have seen a great deal of the world—of life, as it is *called*—before I settled down on this spot of earth. I have *witnessed* a great deal of suffering, and had my own share of tribulation, too, and one of the ethical conclusions I have reached is this,—that in nine cases out of ten the sin of the transgressor is less deplorable in its results than the condemnation of the righteous. My dear, are you quite sure you are right?"

A pale glow passed over Sybil's face. Her eyes slowly kindled with a look of spiritual enthusiasm.

"My husband is not a transgressor," she said.

"In that case, I am at a loss either to speculate or advise."

"I think," continued Sybil, gently, "if you will allow me, I will wait till to-morrow before I acknowledge your kindness by my confidence. I mean, I should like to think the matter over,—so many interests besides my own are concerned."

Miss Harrison was decidedly disappointed. Her interest, not to say her curiosity, had been deeply stirred, but she accepted the decision with well-bred acquiescence.

"So be it," she answered. "I have no doubt you are right."

"And if I should decide I cannot tell you," said Sybil, rising and kneeling on the floor at her feet, "you must hold judgment in suspense and condemn neither of us! I think it is quite possible that one or both may be making a grave mistake, but at least," with a heavy sigh, "it is not on the side of self-indulgence that we err."

Miss Harrison bent over her, and passed her hand tenderly over the dark, shining braids of hair.

"My child," she answered, "hear another lesson from my experience. We never go further astray than when we pick up and bind a voluntary cross upon our shoulders. Believe me, the martyrdom that wins and saves is never sought or self-imposed."

Sybil took her hand and kissed it.

"I am quite sure you are right," she said, gravely; and then, rising, she drew out of the bosom of her dress a miniature portrait of Karslake, that had been painted in Rome, and which she wore attached to her neck by an invisible string. She detached it and handed it to her hostess.

"You say you are a physiognomist: interpret that face for me."

Miss Harrison took it eagerly, and walked under the lamp with it for better inspection. The picture was a fine rendering of a countenance in which the highest type of physical beauty struck the observer less than its spiritual expression.

"Am I to accept this as a portrait?" lifting up her quick gaze, "or is it an imaginative artist's attempt to work up a good subject to perfection?"

"It is a portrait that, in my opinion, falls far short of the original."

The other smiled and gazed a little longer, then, returning it, said,—

"If that man is your husband, my dear, the only advice I shall have to give you to-morrow is to return to him at once, at all costs."

CHAPTER XXXII.

Sybil was at once so weary and so soothed and comforted by the circumstances of the night that she fell asleep soon after her head was laid on the pillow. But after two or three hours' slumber she awoke; the fire in her room was out, and profound darkness and silence reigned.

Who does not know such hours of awakening, when the pain that sleep has lulled—the life-agony we have forgotten in oblivion—seizes upon our quickening consciousness with renewed vigor? She started up in bed, at a momentary loss to realize where she was, and frightened at her strange surroundings; and then, as all the cruel truth recurred to her, she sank back again with an inarticulate moan of suffering.

There was no more sleep for her that night, and it would be tedious to follow her mental conflict through its long watches; but Miss Harrison was distressed to see that her guest looked paler and more worn at breakfast than when she had parted from her overnight.

When the meal was over, and her domestic arrangements made, she established herself, stocking in hand, in her accustomed place by the fireside, and invited Sybil, who was looking drearily out of the window into the small, strictly-enclosed garden, to a seat by her side.

"My dear," she said, "I am an old woman, and can keep a secret. I think you will do well to trust me."

Sybil came towards her.

"I will trust you," she answered, passionately, "because I begin to distrust myself and my own courage."

And then she sat down and told her story, not disguising names or localities. The only point she reserved—and Sara Helstone's prompt misgivings had taught her the wisdom of doing this—were the details of the accusation against her husband.

Miss Harrison knitted as she listened; it gave the speaker confidence to see that she was able to take her disclosures quietly, and she occasionally interrupted her with a sagacious and penetrating question in the most matter-of-fact tone of voice.

When she had finished she asked,—

"And what are your plans for the future, my dear Mrs. Karslake?"

"I mean to take the mid-day train to Plymouth, and end my journey at one of the beautiful, lonely sea-coast places in Devon."

"And take lodgings or a house? Are you well provided with money?"

"I shall take lodgings, of course. I have money enough for immediate emergencies and means of earning money when that is gone."

Her color rose as she spoke; she was always unwilling to refer, ever so distantly, to her literary work.

"You have no private means, then? You will, I am sure, wish me to be frank with you. If Mr. Karslake is rich, did he do nothing in the way of marriage settlements?"

A flame of color swept over Sybil's cheek.

"Yes," she answered, "he settled three hundred pounds a year upon me, concerning the expenditure of which he never asks a question or will suffer me to give any account. But I will not touch that now."

"Why not? Will it make him happier to know it is accumulating at his banker's, and that his wife has not only thought proper to leave him, but to work or starve as well?"

"I have no intention of starving, but work will keep mind and time employed, and I could not bring myself to draw upon his funds when the poor compensation of my love and help is *withdrawn.*"

"And do not you think he will find you out in your Devon solitude? or, that failing, how long do you suppose your own resolution will last? Is this heroic separation to be for all time?"

"God forbid!" cried Sybil. "But meantime I shall hold to my purpose with all the tenacity I can; for if I were to fail, and go back to him and bring destruction upon him, even his love would not reconcile me to my own contempt. But, at bottom, I fear I am hoping he will discover and coerce me, or that my strength of mind will give way, and I shall delude myself into thinking I have mistaken my duty." And the unhappy girl bowed her face upon her hands and burst into tears.

"My poor child," said Miss Harrison, in a tone of tender ridicule, "it is all on both sides a quixotic magnanimity! The good opinion of the world was never yet worth the sacrifice of a love like yours, and I am almost equally sure Mr. Karslake is straining a point of honor beyond reason and necessity. Don't you think he will give way to get you back again?"

"No; I think it is possible circumstances may arise which will set him free to give the explanation he now withholds, but otherwise my belief is he would rather die than break his bond."

"Die!" repeated the other, with a smile. "My dear, that is not by any means the hardest thing to do: does not Bacon remind us that there is no passion so weak but it has overcome the fear of death? It will be much harder for your husband to live, with all his duty-work to do, and everything that made life pleasant taken away."

Then silence fell between the two women, broken after a while by the clock on the mantel-piece striking eleven.

"I must go," said Sybil, rising, "go and shut my trunk and prepare for my journey. I have no words to thank you, but I shall never forget you so long as I live."

Her face was pale, but she had wiped away all traces of tears: it was easy to see she was holding her endurance at high strain.

"And why should you go?" exclaimed Miss Harrison, suddenly dashing away the moisture from her own eyes. "I doubt if any hole or corner in Devon can be safer than this *little* Surrey village. I am a lone woman, with no friends on the spot and a bigger house than I want; your sweet face took me captive before your sad story won my heart. You shall stay here."

Sybil hesitated; her heart grew warm in welcome of the idea, but dare she embrace it consistently with her duty and her bond?

Miss Harrison watched her changing face with intense interest.

"Let us consider the matter seriously," she said. "No one has seen you but Martha, and I have already introduced you as a friend of my own. Such you can remain. She knows I have often talked of engaging some intelligent girl as companion to myself, and, if it will not hurt your pride, that is the *rôle* that you shall fill. You will have to drop your name and even your status as a wife, but you will find a home and a friend instead of the dreary isolation you had in view. Will you consent?"

"Only too thankfully, if you really think I can accept your offer with any reasonable prospect of concealment; also, if you will allow me the poor equivalent of paying my own expenses. In our respective circumstances I could not be dependent even on such sweet charity as yours."

Miss Harrison reflected. "Well, my dear, that shall be as you please. As you are something of a *grande dame*, perhaps it is only fair, and in that case you will have to draw upon your marriage settlement, which appears to me the most sensible thing you can do, only we shall have to be very guarded and diplomatic in doing it. May I ask, in my new character of motherly friend, if that tin case is all you have brought away from home."

"Yes," said Sybil, sadly, "and it is all I need. I shall never have occasion to go out. When I want more clothes I can buy them, but I could not take away anything beyond absolute necessaries; as it was it seemed a sort of robbery."

"That is your hyper-refined way of viewing things. It strikes me that the wardrobe you have left behind you will be a very small compensation to Mr. Karslake, and a considerable loss to yourself. I will venture to say you have not a summer garment with you!"

Sybil smiled. "That I certainly have not, but I have never been accustomed to much change of dress; that is, before I was married. It will matter very little now what I put on: of course I shall never wish to meet your friends."

"I don't know about that: too marked a retirement would excite curiosity and lead to inquiry and speculation. You will have to show sometimes, my dear; but comfort yourself! I have hardly a friend in the place beyond the doctor and the parson, and a sensible old lady who keeps a school. Incidental visitors, afternoon tea-callers, are unknown. But what am I to call you?" pursued Miss Harrison, with a vivacious interest in the situation that jarred painfully on the nerves of her companion. "Shall it be Miss Keith? the initial letter will be the same as your own, and—pardon my reminding you—you will have to take off that ring."

In the energy of her zeal, and the keenness of her common sense, she had failed for a moment in the considerate sympathy she had hitherto shown, and was recalled to a sense of the fact by the involuntary contraction of pain that passed over Sybil's face.

"Forgive my bluntness, my dear. It is a fault that has beset me all my life, and even spoiled a friendship before today. But it shall not spoil ours, I hope?"

Sybil stooped and kissed her gratefully, but her heart was too full for speech. She went away for a little time, under the plea of making certain necessary arrangements, but really to strengthen and calm her mind in solitude; and when she came back Miss Harrison silently observed that she had followed her suggestion.

From that day a sort of mechanical routine life began for Mrs. Karslake. She had suffered herself to be introduced as Miss Keith to her friend's few friends, and then withdrawn herself as soon as politeness and discretion would permit. In order to account for her obvious sadness and depression, Miss Harrison invented the legend that she had fallen from a higher rank, and lost fortune and lover at the same time; hence the warm sympathy she felt for her; and this romance was currently reported at Esher, though it did not reach Sybil's ears.

She had had the wisdom to stipulate for perfect freedom in regard to her hours of privacy, and for the privilege of a constant fire in her pleasant and commodious bedroom. The first *purchase* she made on her own account was a writing-desk of plain but adequate construction, as her intention was to carry on her literary work with a sustained industry and purpose greater than she had been able or even desirous of putting forth before.

It was to this source she looked for the supply of money to meet her current expenses, for, in spite of Miss Harrison's common sense, she still felt an invincible reluctance to draw upon her husband's bankers, a reluctance which she felt quite sure would yield only to the most stringent necessity.

Also, she was able to console herself with the reflection that such a necessity was not likely to arise. She had always communicated with her publishers under a *nom de plume*, so that no obstacle barred the way to her carrying on her negotiations as before; and the chances were that the ripening effects of time, suffering, and experience would enhance her intellectual capacity and the pecuniary value of her work. Moreover, there was already a small fund of her previous earnings invested elsewhere, which she would be free to draw upon to meet her heavier liabilities; and although, as we have said before, she had originally destined that for her brothers' use, she now felt that the cruel force of circumstance would prevent her from carrying out her intention.

The evenings of the days were always spent in Miss Harrison's society, or it was clearly understood that each might put in a claim on the other's company at any particular time, if so disposed; for there was a complete absence of selfish exaction on both sides.

Sybil never talked about ner literary work to her friend, nor read any portion of it aloud, her opinion being that power and concentration were wasted in so doing; and she was not at all displeased to find that Miss Harrison's abiding impression was that her labor was an admirable resource, but of small intrinsic merit.

The only relaxation she enjoyed was a daily constitutional walk across the fields, or through the lanes of the neighborhood, which her health and former habits of life rendered imperative. She had declined to go to church at all, having a morbid dread of being recognized by some chance stranger, and also, it must be owned, an imperfect sense of the benefits to be derived from the teachings of the prosy, gossiping, middle-aged gentleman she had heard discourse in her friend's parlor.

This point Miss Harrison had warmly disputed with her, but without effect; she had asked Sybil what she should say in the way of decent explanation to her friends.

"It would never do, my dear, to let them think you are a pagan or a free-thinker: the ægis of my respectability would scarcely reach so far as that. Mr. Ellis would insist on my turning you out of doors, before my own faith became perverted. I would rather spread the report that you are stone-deaf or a Papist."

Sybil smiled. "If it is necessary to fib in my behalf, which will be another item in the reckoning of my debt to you, please tell people the former; otherwise Mr. Ellis will be bent on my conversion."

Miss Harrison shook her head, laughing.

"I have never particularly inquired into Mr. Karslake's religious views, but surely they must be the broadest of the broad, or he would never have chosen such a heretic as yourself."

It was consistent with Sybil's delicate reserve of nature that she only answered this sally with a smile. To justify the opinions of either her husband or herself would have seemed to her a breach of sacred confidence.

Equally did she shut up within herself the slow anguish of her daily life,—the desire that was almost insupportable, the passionate yearning that sapped the springs of youth within her. Many a night witnessed her conflict and her tears, but morning always saw her in time for Miss Harrison's early breakfast, pale and grave of necessity, but gentle and self-contained.

It was now the ambition of her heart to emulate her husband's graces.

But when the long day was over, and her chamber door secured against intrusion for the night, she would unfasten the ring which she wore attached to the same elastic string as his portrait, kiss it with a lingering tenderness that had a touch of solemnity in it, slip it on her finger, and wear it till the morning came and the dreary round of pretence and unreality had to be resumed.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"The whole matter is incredible,—an insult to common sense! Your letter was unintelligible, and your explanation of it worse. What I want to know is simply this: what has become of my daughter?"

The speaker is Herbert Dorrimore, and the scene the old library at Ashlands, looking almost precisely the same as on the dreary November afternoon we first introduced the reader to it.

Whatever amenities had been otherwise introduced into the household had not been allowed to penetrate here. The room was as forlorn of aspect, the fire as meagre and comfortless as then, and the scholar himself, paler and thinner than of old, was at much at odds with the world as ever. The burden of his family cares, however lightened, still pressed upon him with a weight that he resented as a personal injury, and the public was growing more and more indifferent to his efforts to enlighten and instruct. Moreover, the one thing he loved, as well as his narrow and tepid nature could love anything, was his daughter Sybil, and he had long ago convinced himself that in giving her to Julian Karslake he had done a very noble action, on the lines of unselfish sacrifice. As for the substantial benefits he and his received from his son-in-law, he had brought himself to regard these as a very inadequate recognition of the same, and thus he avoided the uncomfortable necessity of gratitude.

It was part and parcel of the same cold-blooded egotism that led him now, in the crisis of the existing domestic complications, to seize with avidity upon those points which could be turned into accusation and reproach against Karslake himself, and thus still further reduce the claims he had upon his consideration.

It was he to whom he was speaking now, in the sharp accentuated tones of intense irritability.

Julian had come down to Ashlands, in obedience to a peremptory summons from Mr. Dorrimore, who, not unreasonably, insisted on a personal explanation of the astounding intelligence that had been conveyed to him, partly by letter, partly by the oral testimony of the two boys, who had been sent home to Ashlands to finish their holidays.

Six weeks had passed since Sybil's flight, and it had been a period of almost intolerable trial to the rector of St. Mark's. All means to trace her, direct and indirect, short of those of an absolutely professional character, had been employed, but had failed utterly.

It was not only the utter loss and barrenness of his own private life, or the mental and physical exhaustion consequent on the incessant effort and sustained tension of expectation, but the matter could not fail to become a subject of public discussion and private gossip and speculation.

He well knew that in every household in his parish, and far beyond its limit, the question "What could have induced Mrs. Karslake to run away from her husband?" was untiringly debated. If not a fatal blow to the salutary influence he had acquired, it was a check so decisive that he almost doubted whether Helstone's disclosures could have worked him much more evil.

A man who had so grievously failed in his own domestic relations was scarcely qualified to regulate and direct the life and conscience of his parishioners; the world, indeed, had given him credit for somewhat exceptional merit and virtue, but the world, as was so often the way in these cases, must necessarily have been deceived. There was a secret flaw—a skeleton in the cupboard—to account for such a catastrophe.

It was some consolation at this time to his mind that popular feeling bore more hardly upon him than upon his wife. The fact was, there had always been a certain sweet dignity and obvious loyalty towards her husband in young Mrs. Karslake that was almost impossible to associate with any slip from conjugal rectitude on her side. True, there were some exceptions to this rule,—women who shook their heads and muttered some commonplaces about "always suspecting those who seemed so much better and cleverer than their neighbors;" but such remarks were not likely to reach the husband's ears.

What was most hard to bear was when some respected member of his church called privately upon him, and, pointing out the mischief this scandal was working in the neighborhood, asked him, with serious kindness, if it were not possible for him to give some personal explanation.

What answer was possible? He could not say his wife had left him to divert from him a disgraceful public disclosure,—that would have ruined his character,—not from any solicitude about his own personal fate, but because the slightest admission of the kind involved the interests he was pledged to maintain.

As some reply was imperative, he did say on one or two of these occasions that his wife, for whom his love and esteem were unshaken, had left him under a sense of mistaken duty, but it was quite out of his power to explain the circumstances of the case.

"Then, my dear Mr. Karslake," had been the rejoinder, "I fear it will be out of your power to keep your present hold upon your congregation and parish. Your influence for good and general usefulness will be greatly lessened."

"In that case," he answered, "my course will be clear. I am as willing and able now as before to do my duty,—or, at least, I believe that I shall be, when I have had a little more time to rally from the effects of this blow. But if my parishioners continue to distrust or reject me, I shall not force myself upon them. I will place my resignation in the hands of the bishop."

And then, no longer able to resist Mr. Dorrimore's importunities, he had gone down to Ashlands to bear the brunt of the father's indignant displeasure.

"What I want to know," repeated Mr. Dorrimore, "is neither more nor less than this: what has become of my daughter?"

He had a habit of reiterating what he considered the telling points of his speech, in a way fatal to the patience of an ordinary listener,—of varying the form but not the substance of a question, and asserting, with angry insistence, that a straightforward answer was denied him.

The provocations he had already inflicted upon his son-in-law during the interview would have driven some men to outrage and insult; but, apart from a faculty of forbearance which was based in the solid earth of principle, Karslake had necessarily a profound sense of the involuntary injury he had done him, and a noble tolerance for the constitutional infirmities of the man, aggravated by his present distress.

"*If I could tell you* that," he answered, "there would be no question between us. If I knew where Sybil was to be found, I believe I should have no difficulty in inducing her to return to me."

"'Believe—have no difficulty—induce her to return to you,'" sneered Mr. Dorrimore. "The situation is monstrous! Married little more than a year, and the wife cuts herself adrift from her husband, he professing his helplessness to discover her! In that case, why haven't you set the detectives to work? Would the shame of a private inquiry-office be greater than this public scandal?—that is, if you are in earnest to find her? But it is impossible to understand you! On what ground do you justify the keeping back the truth from me, her father?"

"So far as I know the truth I have laid it before you, fully recognizing your rights in the matter. I have told you I was threatened by Mr. Helstone with the public disclosure of certain personal circumstances, through which he chose to consider my reputation damaged, and that he consented to withdraw his persecution on the condition that my wife severed the connection between us. She has taken this step simply to save my good name."

"Heaven and earth!" exclaimed Mr. Dorrimore, wheeling round in his chair so as to face the speaker; "and you are coward and miscreant enough to suffer her to do this thing,—to accept the rehabilitation of your worthless clerical prestige at the cost of her reputation and happiness! For cold-blooded calculating selfishness, commend me to the parson and the saint!"

"Your indignation would be perfectly warrantable if I or any man could be guilty of such baseness," returned Karslake, with practised self-control; "but I had no knowledge of her intention until it was fulfilled,—at the cost, you must surely understand, of my happiness as well as her own. I feel bound to add that I had always proposed to face the consequences of Mr. Helstone's action: she, dreading them for my sake, yielded to the cruel pressure he put upon her."

"And in so doing, to my mind, she gave in her adhesion to Gilbert Helstone's conclusions. The man is no fool, and has plenty of professional experience. Am I to believe, on your *assurance* alone, that he has trumped up a case with no evidence to support it? or that Sybil, with her clear head, would have run away from you on a charge she utterly rejected? No, no, Julian Karslake; you draw too largely on my credulity. I shall sift this so-called calumny to the bottom."

"You will, of course, take what steps you think proper under the pain and pressure of the circumstances," replied Karslake, "and I have no means beyond my unsupported assurance to convince you of the truth of my statements or denials."

He got up and went to the window, to relieve the strain and weariness of the intolerable controversy.

The lawn before him was an unbroken plain of stainless snow, and the overgrown firs and pines had taken to themselves a magical beauty, under the weight of the same burden. The downfall still continued, and was drifting rapidly into fantastic wreaths and banks, according to the direction of the cutting east wind. If matters continued thus, he would soon be snowed in.

The peevish voice of Mr. Dorrimore soon broke the silence.

"Oblige me by sitting down: I cannot talk to a man at the other end of the room! How comes it you have put yourself into the power of a man like Gilbert Helstone? Rather, how comes it you held back from me the knowledge of those damaging circumstances, able to wreck your reputation? Was it the conduct of a man of honor, let alone one pledged by his calling to special uprightness? I always marvelled why you bid so high for Sybil: is this the explanation?"

His thin lips curled into a sneer as he spoke, and a flush of genuine passion touched his sallow cheek and brow.

"I am an old man," he added, in the low tone of repressed excitement; "but, before God, if you have tampered with my girl I will find the way to avenge her! Tell me, if you dare, what was the precise charge against you that your wife could not brook?"

Karslake still kept his place at the window, apparently watching the drifting snow fall, but in reality conscious of nothing but the increasing desperation of his own position. How was he to escape the legitimate demands of his wife's father? Was he to lose all? He had been bereft of love for the sake of his honor, but no vestige of external honor would be left him. The pitiless insults to which he was subjected stung and cut to the quick his vital sense of dignity and rectitude, but how could he resent or repudiate them,—he who labored under the imputation of a treachery so absolute that the vilest natures would have recoiled from it?

If he could have answered, "I have a brother: ask me no more questions: the mystery and the disgrace are his," he might have silenced every tongue and won back his fleeting credit and happiness. But a boyish oath to a dying mother, accepted and confirmed under circumstances of extremest urgency, bound him in infrangible bonds.

"At all costs" he had pledged himself to conceal the fact of Harry Karslake's existence. It was an unlimited obligation, from which there was no escape.

But it was no part of his character to shirk or flinch from any measure of the difficulties which beset him.

He left the window, and came back to the chair opposite Mr. Dorrimore.

"I acknowledge," he said, "that you have a right to ask me these questions, and to form conclusions most injurious to myself when I tell you I cannot answer them,—dare not, if you choose to put it in that way. The explanation I refuse to give you I have equally refused to give my wife. I mention this that you may judge how useless it will be to urge me further."

The old man looked at him steadily. No doubt he misread the sternness and pallor of the face before him: the hard composure of tone which was the result of strained self-command seemed to him like the effrontery of guilt.

He pushed back his chair, as if to increase the distance between them. "Do I need to hear more?" he asked. "I have forced my girl—my girl, like whom there was not another—on a villain, and she has found it out for herself. Curse you!" he added, with the impotence of senile passion, "why did you bribe so high that I coerced her inclination? Had I left her alone she would have had nothing to say to you."

Karslake listened in silence. What was to be gained by contesting this point of accusation or that? On the whole, it was better to receive the full burden of ignominy than to excite suspicion and inquiry by disputing it in detail. Now as before—now as ever, to the end of life, whenever that might come—he had the courage of his own conscientious approval to support him, and to give such an expression of simple dignity to his aspect as fixed the attention of Mr. Dorrimore.

"You are a subtle deceiver," he said. "Even now, when I look at you, I am tempted to doubt if you are as bad as you seem. Still, the idea is untenable that any man would submit to public reprobation, and practically divorce the wife he professes to love, by withholding a personal explanation. I shall see Gilbert Helstone, and learn from him what you refuse to tell."

"And when you have done that your conviction of my guilt will be still more absolute and severe."

"If the weather were not so atrocious," continued Mr. Dorrimore, "I would telegraph to him to-morrow, and give you the opportunity of confronting and confounding your enemy, —if it would be any satisfaction to you."

"It would be none," replied Karslake, knowing that as he spoke he was tearing away the last shred of belief held by the other in his favor. "I might reiterate my denial of Mr. Helstone's conclusions, but I should be utterly unable to disprove them."

Again Mr. Dorrimore turned his piercing gaze upon him.

"Have you a brother or bosom friend?" he asked, sharply. "I can believe you capable of the despicable folly of sacrificing your own interests for some one else, though even the most quixotic fool would regard the duty he owed his wife. If I remember right, you told me when you were courting my daughter that you had no blood relation whatever?"

"Your recollection is correct. I did so tell you."

There was an inflection in the tone not lost on the keen ear of Mr. Dorrimore. He pulled his chair nearer to the other, and seemed to rake his countenance with the relentless keenness of his gaze.

Karslake felt sick at heart: this was becoming one of the critical moments of existence, but he dared not wince beneath the scrutiny. He had spoken in perfect good faith at the time referred to, believing then his brother had lost his life at sea; but if the question were now to be repeated?—if it were.

Almost the last words spoken by the broken, desperate man had been, "You will never own your brother is a living man? renew your promise!" and he had consented to the pledge. Was this last extremity to be forced upon him?—his honor to be rooted in the dishonor of a lie? his fidelity to be maintained at so stupendous a sacrifice?

Almost consummate as was his habitual self-command, he found it now impossible to control the working of his face, but the growing darkness of the wintry afternoon was a point in his favor. It baffled the completeness of Mr. Dorrimore's examination.

"In that case," he said, with a cynical little laugh, "you must be in the same position now; and my romantic theory that you were playing the part of sacrificial victim is quashed. I understand you to say you have no brother?"

Hesitation would have been ruin and discovery. Karslake raised his eyes to his inquisitor, and replied, quietly,—

"I have no brother."

As he spoke he felt as though the very shadow of death had passed upon his soul; but he would not have recalled the words had it been possible, or have refused to make the same declaration again under the same circumstances. It is no figure of speech to say that he would rather have surrendered his life than have been constrained to utter this false denial; but then it was not his life but his cherished integrity that was demanded of him, and, as he judged, there was no alternative but submission.

Let casuists dispute the question, but assuredly there are crises in human experience where the sin in ordinary is transmuted into a sacrificial offering.

"It would be useless to protract the conversation any longer," returned Mr. Dorrimore, with impatient weariness. "Until I have seen Gilbert Helstone I can form no positive conclusion, nor come to any decision. You decline to stay and meet him?"

"I do: if possible, I must return to town to-morrow."

"I have no wish to detain you. I shall adopt my own means for the recovery of my daughter."

Karslake rose. "Perhaps," he said, "it will be unnecessary for us to meet again? I shall leave by the early train to-morrow, and I will spend the evening with the children."

"It will not be possible to return by the early train," returned his host, querulously. "We have not horses or carriages at command, and no woman-servant could go through this snow to order a trap in the village. But, anyhow, we need not meet, whether your departure is fixed for seven or eleven. I will wish you good-by to-night."

"Good-by," said Julian, in response. He hesitated whether he should venture to add any word of the sympathy and regret with which his mind was full, but refrained, feeling sure it would be rejected.

In the hall he paused, as was natural, to look through the wide portal, through which the snow and now the rising moon gleamed white and lustrous. At the same moment the door opposite the library—the room where he had held his first interview with Sybil, and which was now the children's schoolroom—opened, and the slight childish figure and sweet face of Lucy appeared.

"We heard you come out from papa," she said, "and Miss Taylor has sent me to ask if you will not come in and have a cup of tea."

"I cannot come in," he replied, going to the house door and opening it with a sort of blind instinct, so that the icy air might blow on his throbbing temples. "Go back to the warm room," he added, seeing that the child shrank back from the chilling draught: "I am going out for a walk."

"Out for a walk! you will lose your way in the snow. Bertie says it is up to his knees. You must not go out to-night! Besides, you have not got your overcoat on!—you would catch your death of cold! Do come in and have some tea!"

She looked up at him pleadingly, with eyes so like her sister's that he turned to her suddenly, caught her in his arms, and kissed her passionately. His self-control was unhinged; a wave of desperate feeling was passing over his mind. The element of the insufferable seemed to have been introduced, by the late cruel incident, into his life, or, if it were not absolutely so, his resolution had for the time escaped him, and it would need a sterner conflict than any he had yet known before he should be able to regain possession of it. He felt that solitude and the night air and sky were, under any conditions, absolutely necessary to him.

Still, he would not betray himself before the tender-hearted child. He shut the door and drew back into the hall.

"I was looking out, Lucy, to see if it were practicable to get to the village to-night, where I have some business to do, and I see that it is. I know the road well, every tree, gate-post, and field, between this and Roosden Magna. If you will, you shall help me on with my coat, and then bring me a cup of tea out here."

Lucy obeyed, springing upon a chair to perform the function better. Then she went back for the tea, watching him drink it as he stood with all a child's unspoken depth of sympathy. She was thinking how changed he looked since she saw him last, when he came to Ashlands at midsummer to fetch Sybil home; and with this thought the tears slowly welled into her eyes and began to roll down her cheek.

"Are you going to look for Sybil?" she asked. "She is not in these parts, or we should have found her ourselves. I wish you would not go out to-night, but come into the school-room and talk to us. You look so tired, and Miss Taylor particularly wants to see you."

"I will come in, if you are not all gone to bed, when I get back." And he opened the door and stepped out on the frozen snow.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"MAN is born to trouble, as the sparks fly upward," wrote the Syrian sage in the dim ages of an uncertain antiquity; and it is an oppressive and almost exhausting consideration that each cycle of the race, and even each unit of the mass, fulfils the dictum in their own experience. And not only are the sorrows of mankind inevitable, but they are as incalculable and diverse as the sands on the sea-shore, or as the myriad individualities which rise, suffer, and pass away from the stage of mortal life.

No one whose experience has been deepest will deny that the irrevocableness of *death*, the pain and loss of bereavement, are not the heaviest blows of destiny. There is a blessed tendency in human nature to accept the stroke dealt by an unseen Power, and from which reason urges there is no escape; and with such acquiescence peace and resignation are at least possible.

But when the troubles of life assume the guise of *capricious injustice*, and an arbitrary cruelty of circumstance impossible to evade or neutralize, by action either personal or of others, then do perseverance of purpose and resolution of endurance rise to almost heroic proportions.

To have seen his adored young wife sicken and die would have been doubtless a supreme and terrible experience to Julian Karslake, but it would surely have been more tolerable than the corroding anxiety, the exhausting yearning and despair, of his present state.

He had not even the poor satisfaction of knowing that she was safe and well, but was harassed by fears and misgivings he had no means of allaying, as to the condition to which her magnanimous indiscretion might have reduced the noble, sensitive, and cherished girl. He knew she had taken very little money with her, nor drawn upon her banking-account since she had left her home. Where and by what means was she supporting life?

The memory of her tender passion on that last morning before her departure was almost more than his manhood could sustain. It seemed to dissolve his very soul to consider that it was the intensity of her love for him that had given her the strength necessary to sacrifice it to his interests.

His interests—alas, how had she mistaken them! What public discredit could he not have endured unflinchingly, under the sustaining sense of his own conscientiousness and his wife's loyal trust? And even if the field of duty had been closed to him in the open thoroughfares of life, how many wastes and by-paths remained where he might have labored in willing obscurity!

And all this cruel suffering had been imposed by the vice and selfish exigence of one man and the vindictive hate of another. He suffered his mind for a time to rest on this consideration and exhaust its bitterness: it was better to recognize, accept, and vanquish it than blindly shut his eyes to the aggravations of his lot.

How hard that lot was for him—alas! how hard for her—it would have been difficult to estimate; but there was no help for it. His freedom had been compromised from boyhood: the moral obliquity of Harry Karslake had been the curse and burden of his life, exhibiting itself in every action and turn of thought with hideous consistency.

He had lied and pilfered as a school-boy; then, in his premature manhood, had squandered his equal fortune on the race-course and betting-ring, and in other worse outlets for riotous living; had ravished poor Nell of her love and her honor; and had finally cut himself adrift from society by the commission of a felony against the man who had stood in the position of guardian to both brothers.

Had the fond mother, who had held him to the last in her dying arms, foreseen the evil tendency of the child, and sought to guarantee him against his own bias by forcing so reckless a pledge from the elder brother?

"You will never forsake Harry," she had faltered, as the pale, stricken lad knelt by her side to receive her last commands; "he is so much younger and tenderer than you. Promise me you will always stand by him as long as you live, and will help him, even at any cost to yourself."

And Julian had promised, not blindly, but even then with some dim perception that the pledge would involve pain and sacrifice. But what pain and sacrifice would he not have accepted to have been able to soothe the last moments of a mother he adored! The very last words she spoke to him were a repetition of her prayer.

"You remember? you will never forget? You are so much stronger-minded than Harry. You will secure his welfare in preference to your own?"

And he had again answered that he would, and ratified the pledge by an appeal to God at the poor mother's feverish entreaty.

"Now kiss me, Julian!" she had said, as if passively content to sink out of life, now that she had secured a measure of safety for her favorite son; and he had laid his warm lips upon her chill forehead, as setting a sacred seal upon his bondage, and also as an expression of the unrecognized love which was so silently but profoundly wounded by her wayward indifference to himself.

And from that hour to this his life had been harassed and impoverished by his steady devotion to his promise, not kept only according to the letter, but in the most generous rendering of the spirit of the same.

His character, fine and great in its natural elements, and *welded into* stronger cohesion by the principles of his creed, *acquired from* this protracted discipline a power of resolution and endurance which stood him in good stead in the present cruel crisis of his life.

It was his pledge to Harry Karslake, and his abiding fear that the latter would sooner or later bring some public shame upon his family, that had withheld him from disclosing his love to Sybil Dorrimore according to ordinary modes and at an earlier period; and it was not till the report of Harry's death by shipwreck had been abundantly confirmed that Julian felt himself at liberty to ask her in marriage.

Also, at the time that he took this course he was ignorant of the crime that had led to his brother's flight, Mr. Anstruther being absent in America, and his bankers having paid the forged cheque without suspicion: so that it was not till his return, some months after, that the truth was discovered. But the news of the death of the unworthy young man had reached them before this, and naturally mitigated the wrath of the man he had injured.

"Only," he had said grimly to Julian, as he folded up the felonious scrap of paper and placed it in the recesses of his pocket-book, "I will preserve this as evidence of a fact. Sometimes dead men come back again; and were Harry Karslake now living, he should suffer at my hands to the last extremity of the law."

Julian had urged, with eager insistence, to be allowed to repay the money of which Mr. Anstruther had been defrauded, but to this the stern old Scotchman would not consent.

"I hold to my own," he answered, "and will let no man willingly escape who has wronged me; but I will not rob you to indemnify myself for your brother's defalcations. You may thank God he is at the bottom of the sea."

And when the natural horror and magnanimous regret connected with Harry's untimely end had become softened by time, it was impossible for Julian Karslake not to recognize that, for the first time in his life, he was a free man, and to turn gratefully to receive into his large and tender nature the promise and fruition of Sybil Dorrimore's growing love.

But such blessed sense of freedom was very short-lived. The occasion on which Gilbert Helstone had seen him at the Crystal Palace with Nell and her child had been a death-blow to his security.

The girl, to whom he had been friend and adviser in all her troubles, had written to him asking him to meet her in some place of secrecy, as she had some very important information to give him. She had fixed the hour and the place, falling back on the precautions her unworthy lover had taught her; and the news she had to communicate was conveyed in a letter in Harry's well-known handwriting, telling her he had escaped with life from the wreck, but with the loss of everything besides, and bidding her inform Julian, that he might send help to his relief and advise him how best to act.

"You will remember," he wrote, "that his old pledge in my favor must now take the form of keeping the secret of my existence from all the world."

No wonder Gilbert Helstone had read pain and consternation in the face he confronted.

CHAPTER XXXV.

KARSLAKE went back to town the day after his interview with Mr. Dorrimore, and with a distinct programme laid down by himself in regard to the course he should pursue.

He had not come back from his night-walk to Roosden Magna in time to fulfil his conditional promise to Lucy, but when he did return he had conquered in the fight against rebellion, surrender, and despair, and had regained possession of his patience and his courage.

One of the first steps he took on his return was to address a circular letter to the most respected and influential members of his church, requesting them to meet him in the parish school-room on the following Tuesday evening, in order that he might make a personal statement. He added that the invitation, though necessarily given directly to a few, was intended to include any parishioner who thought proper to attend.

Before deciding upon a proceeding which he knew to be momentous, Karslake had taken into profound consideration the possibility of revealing the truth of present facts to Mr. Anstruther and endeavoring to obtain a pardon for his brother, so as to set himself at liberty to wipe out the scandal that threatened to blight his life.

He was no narrow fanatic bent on self-sacrifice, or one who deemed the repression of natural instincts and of earthly joy the highest form of religious duty. On the contrary, his love for his wife, and his appreciation of their mutual happiness, was as intense and keen a feeling as was possible for youthful manhood to conceive.

The anguish of separation and uncertainity, the proud and painful recoil from public shame and private injustice, were not accepted and endured by him as sacrificial offerings acceptable to God, but simply in the spirit of a soldier who is constrained to meet and suffer the wound from which it would be cowardice to flee. To recover his wife and preserve his good name were aspirations of invincible strength, second only to the one resolve that neither should be attained by the sacrifice of his brother's safety.

And the disheartening conclusion he reached in regard to the contemplated appeal to Mr. Anstruther was, that it could not be attempted with safety, nor, consequently, with honor. Apart from vow or oath to dead or living, he could not purchase his own immunity at the risk of his brother's prosecution and ruin, and it would be this latter which the stern old merchant would be bent on accomplishing. There was nothing for it but to meet the present emergency with what prudence and courage he could.

On the evening appointed by the Rev. Julian Karslake to meet his parishioners, the room was crowded to excess, and a feeling of strong excitement, or perhaps it would be juster to say of intense curiosity, prevailed. In the anxiety to obtain good places, the people had assembled some time before the hour named for the commencement of the proceedings, and the interval was spent in an eager discussion of the situation, in which the ignoble tendency to believe evil far exceeded the divine charity which hesitates to accept it.

When, however, the rector appeared, punctual to his own arrangement, his personal presence made, as usual, a diversion in his favor. Every eye followed him as he walked quietly and somewhat slowly up to the little reading-desk, from which he knew he should be expected to speak. He *stood for a few moments* silently surveying the crowd before him, with the practised sensibility of a public speaker, able to perceive the moral atmosphere by which he is surrounded.

There was no trace of nervous hurry or excitement about him, and when he spoke the words fell in perfect phrases, and with the faultless purity of accent for which he was distinguished.

"Gentlemen," he said, "for I will not not venture to call you my friends, lest there should be any among you who would repudiate the name, the object for which I have asked you to come here to-night is to help me to form a decision. It is a decision not so much personal to myself, or I should have needed no advice upon it, as one in which the interests of the parish at large are mainly involved. To be brief, I desire to collect your suffrages as to the expediency or inexpediency of my remaining at my post as rector of St. Mark's."

He paused a moment, for a confused murmur arose in the hall, that conveyed the idea of excited feeling, but left the nature of that feeling uncertain and inarticulate. Presently, however, a voice from one of the back benches said, with that coarseness which, oddly enough, proverbially characterizes such interruptions,—

"Come to the point! we shall know better how to answer when we've heard what you've got to say."

There was a partial manifestation of displeasure at this abrupt expression of opinion, but, as the speaker in point of fact conveyed the leading sentiment of the majority the offence was naturally condoned.

"If," resumed Karslake, with the same quietness as before, "the expectation prevails that I am about to clear up the mystery of my domestic relations and offer a satisfactory explanation of the fact that I stand alone in your midst, it will be effectually disappointed. On this subject, except the barren assurance that it is the result of circumstances beyond my control and totally unconnected with any point of moral transgression, I must maintain an absolute silence. Perhaps"—catching the confused buzz of disapprobation—"it is scarcely necessary for me to go on."

Some of his more personal friends cheered lustily, but the speaker was quite conscious that the feeling of the meeting was against him. A general impression of disappointment and balked curiosity prevailed; also, if he had betrayed more emotion he would have excited more sympathy.

"For the rest," he continued, "I came to say that I am personally conscious of no disability, moral or otherwise, that should unfit me for the work of my profession. I am not only as anxious now as before to do my duty, but I am equally qualified to do it; that is, I fully recognise all the imperfection and inadequacy of the past, but it does not take the form of making me incapable of the effort of redeeming it in the future."

It needed no common strength of inward conviction and self-respect to maintain this quiet but dauntless demeanor in the front of an obviously antagonistic assembly, but already it began to tell in his favor, as genuine and simple manifestations of feeling rarely fail to do.

He went on after a moment's hesitation.

"On the other hand, if your confidence in my integrity and sincerity is shaken, I have decided to resign my living at once. I will only live among those who believe at least in my honest endeavor to do right. Where distrust and suspicion existed, labor and devotion, however unstinted, would be lost. It simply rests with you to retain or reject my services."

He was going to sit down, when a thought struck him.

"I should add that in deciding this question against me you will not fatally ruin my worldly prospects, as might be the result in many cases. I believe I should have no great difficulty in finding work elsewhere, and I have private means which, under any circumstances, render me independent of my profession. I mention this that your decision may be unbiassed by any generous consideration for my personal interests."

Had he spoken from deliberate policy instead of from an impulse of conscientious feeling, he could not more effectually have turned the vibrating scale in his favor.

A ringing cheer echoed through the room: the manliness and fairness of his last words, the firmness and dignity of his manner throughout, appealed irresistibly to the Englishman's instinctive love of pluck and fair play. The show of hands seemed to indicate an almost unanimous vote of confidence; a crowd of his personal friends gathered round him to shake hands and offer their unqualified adhesion and good faith; and so infectious became the enthusiasm of the majority that *each man seemed* anxious to constitute himself the representative speaker of the assembly, and to assure the rector, with more or less of exaggeration, that his high regard and confidence had never been shaken.

In the strong excitement of unaccustomed public speaking a great many foolish and extravagant words were uttered, which only served to wound and humiliate the sensitive conscientiousness they were intended to encourage and exalt.

In rising to thank them for the kindness he had received, Karslake disclaimed the excessive tribute they had offered to his worth with the steady conviction of a man whose self-estimate is not affected by the popular voice, and with the sadness of an underlying conviction that it was a matter of chance rather than of right that their present verdict had not been reversed.

As he went slowly down the stairs of the building, having waited till the room was empty before taking his departure, Gilbert Helstone touched him on the arm.

"Did you know I was one of your audience?" he asked, searching the face of the other with his keen vision.

"I did not, and the fact is a matter of indifference. There is only one point I can bring myself to discuss with you: have you any news of my wife?"

As he raised his eyes and looked steadily at Helstone, his face showed evident traces of the physical waste and exhausting mental disquiet of the last three months. All the bitter pain and passion of bereavement which he had desired and planned to inflict had been endured, was being endured, with a resolution that extorted his reluctant recognition.

"Look here, Karslake," he said, in a low, significant voice, "I will remember my debt to you, and pay it back by giving you another chance. Your house is nearest: shall we go there?"

"The question I have asked you can answer on the spot. I have no intention to open up any other subject."

The haughty coldness of his manner brought an angry flush to Helstone's cheek and deadened the involuntary relenting he had felt.

"You venture too far," he answered, with a recurrence to his usual tone of sneering insolence: "the *rôle* of *injured innocence* you have played with so much success up-stairs will *hardly* go down with me. In proposing to intrude upon your privacy just now, I was moved by a touch of sympathy. I have a letter of Sybil Karslake's in my pocket."

The announcement was so unlooked for that Julian staggered under it for a moment, as if he had received a blow. Then a sort of illumination passed over his face, leaving it paler than before.

"For the love of God," he ejaculated, grasping Helstone's arm, "tell me if she is safe and well."

Helstone shook himself free roughly: the moment was the climax of his triumph. All that intolerable hunger of the soul which he knew so well from bitter experience looked out of the intense eager gaze that Karslake fastened upon him; his stern self-repression had yielded as he expected.

"You seem to forget that you declined my overtures just now," was his reply, "and I have no mind to renew them. Mrs. Karslake's letter is a strictly private one, that not the most fastidious honor would think it necessary to show to you. For all that, I will satisfy your mind on these points, on one condition."

"Name it! I must buy at any price the news you have to give: I cannot live without it."

"Keep to the point, if you please. Once more I offer you the opportunity of explaining the scandal of the Crystal Palace and the small house at Stratford-le-Bow. Your persistent obstinacy has almost shaken my belief in the evidence of my own senses. Declare to me fully the paternity of that child, granting you are not responsible for it, and I will consider if we can return upon the old paths."

"You mean that you make the giving me tidings of my wife conditional upon my satisfying your mind on this subject? It is scarcely credible you can carry malignity so far!"

Karslake looked at him with such an instinctive expression of moral recoil as brought a sense of shame and discomfiture to Helstone's mind: he passed it off with a harsh laugh.

"That is my meaning precisely, and in making you such an offer I go beyond my original intention. I am fool enough to be touched, not by your misery, which I can well bear, but by hers, which is greater than I expected. I will put Sybil's letter in your hands, I will even smooth the way to your reunion, but only on the one reasonable condition that you prove to my satisfaction you are not unworthy."

"It is a condition impossible to comply with, and which you know to be impossible. In other words, I accept the torture you probably meant from the first to inflict. I spoke rashly when I said I would buy my peace of mind at any price. I thank God I know so much, that Sybil lives! For the rest, I have long since chosen my part in this matter."

They were not idle nor even tentative words. He turned as he spoke, and walked swiftly out of the building, without giving Helstone the opportunity of reply.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

When the young rector reached his own house he found a messenger waiting for him. A child in the neighborhood had been badly burnt, and the family were in despairing ignorance as to what was best to be done. The parish doctor was absent; the local remedies applied had only aggravated the agonies of the poor little victim; and, as the next alternative, the mother had sent her son to the rectory, to ask if Karslake would come and help them.

All the poor of his parish had an unlimited belief in his faculty of assistance and their right to draw upon it, and no compunction in pressing their claims in a quarter where experience taught them they were seldom rejected.

But on this occasion, after the protracted strain and agitation of the evening, he felt as if he were not sufficiently master of himself to accept this demand upon his firmness; also he shrank from the sight of the child's sufferings.

"My boy," he said, gently, "in these cases a great deal of skill and care is wanted: your mother must send her to the hospital."

He took out his purse with the idea of giving him money, but the boy shook his head.

"Mother told me to say she didn't want money, but she won't send Mattie in there; nothing shall make her! She made sure you'd come yourself, as you did when Bill broke *his leg*, and show her what to do. Her screams are dreadful! it 'most drives mother wild!"

Karslake gathered himself together with an effort.

"I will come almost at once," he said: "run home and tell your mother. I will bring a doctor with me, for I am not surgeon enough for a case like this: we will do all we can."

He sat up all night with the little suffering creature, for the doctor would not allow her mother to be in the room, as her tears and vain lamentations aggravated the distress of the patient. The child was severely but not mortally injured, and much depended on keeping her still, handling her gently, and diverting her mind, if possible, from the pain she had to bear.

Julian Karslake possessed that intuitive aptitude for nursing which seems a heaven-born gift, and is sometimes to be found with men in whose character strength and tenderness are finely balanced, in a degree of perfection scarcely to be paralleled in the other sex.

He sat out the slow hours of the night, for the most part holding at her own desire the child's hand in his, and soothing her with simple, clear, incisive talk on those points where he thought it possible to excite her interest, or in default telling her fairy-tales with unwearied patience, or responding to her moans and sobs by the incessant application of the prescribed palliatives.

The strain upon his own endurance was great, and was protracted till daylight dawned; but at last the child slept. The mother, calmed by her night's rest, took his place at her side, and he was at liberty to go home.

When he entered the library he saw that his good housekeeper had been considerate of his comfort. A bright fire burned; a small table covered with a tempting breakfast stood prepared, and Sybil's little *cafetière* was sending up its fragrant breath above the spirit-lamp.

What acute and unconfessed pangs of anguish pierced his soul as he glanced round the familiar scene and handled the objects consecrated by the touch of his lost wife!

He stood by the table and drank a cup of coffee before going up to his dressing-room; he relied upon his bath and change of dress for righting him after the fatigues of the night, being able as yet to draw largely upon his fine constitution. But any loving eye might have detected the traces that suffering, never more deadly than under strong repression and habitual loss of sleep, were leaving on his face and figure.

On this occasion, however, he felt so thoroughly exhausted that he threw himself on the couch in his dressing-room and slept for an hour or two, so that the morning was fairly advanced before he came down-stairs again; and just as he was on the point of sitting down to breakfast, a servant opened the door and ushered Miss Helstone into the room.

"Lay the breach of conventional etiquette upon me, Mr. Karslake," she said, in her quick decisive manner: "the man obeyed my orders by showing me in here at once. I was so afraid of missing you! I had no idea you kept such fashionable hours."

"I am not always so late. May I have the pleasure of giving you a cup of coffee?"

He drew a chair for her towards the fire as he spoke, and offered to relieve her of the ponderous muff and bag she was carrying. Sara looked at him curiously; she had come full of womanly sympathy and indignation in his behalf, having heard from her brother what had passed between them overnight, and was prepared to find him altogether out of gear,—pale, dejected, even dishevelled.

The comparative freshness of his appearance and faultlessness of his dress, added to the late luxurious breakfast, did more to cool her ardor and reawaken the distrust she had almost dismissed, than the most scathing of Helstone's denunciations.

She declined the cup of coffee stiffly, insisted upon retaining her encumbrances, and, sitting down at a considerable distance from the cheerful blaze, begged he would not allow her presence to interrupt him. "It was surely time he had his breakfast!"

"But I have no appetite to eat now," he said, rising and going up to her with subdued agitation. "Have you come to tell me something about Sybil?—he may have shown you the letter. Surely I shall not appeal to your charity in vain."

Sara was the most impressionable of women. Beneath the pathos of his voice and the expression of pain in his face, her prejudices were melting fast: still, there was a certain consistency to be preserved. In her case she thought it ought to take the form of preliminary austerity, and she set her lips with such rigid firmness, and looked at him with such a stony stare, that the hope he cherished sank within him.

He turned from her, more shaken by the reaction of feeling than he liked to betray, and bowed his head upon his arms, crossed upon the mantel-piece.

She rose up quickly and touched his arm.

"Come, come," she said, "cheer up! If I had been minus the blessed grace of charity, I should not have been here this morning. I have seen her letter,—nay, do not expect too much; I have not got it with me. Comfort yourself, Mr. Karslake," she went on, with considerate rapidity, "that she is in safe and kind keeping. She says she has met with the most generous of friends, and bids us tell you there is nothing lacking to her outward welfare. She sends her love to you, weighted with such passionate tenderness that I can't carry the burden. She implores me to write and tell her how you look, how you sleep, how you live. But the burden of her letter is just one prayer to Gilbert, to suffer her to come back to you."

"And he will refuse to grant her prayer?"

The face he turned towards Sara was haggard enough now to meet her sternest requirements.

"That is not the way in which he puts it: he says the decision rests with yourself. I do not want personally to open this controversy with you, Mr. Karslake. I am well assured from what I have heard that it would be of no use. When you were courting Miss Dorrimore I had a great liking for you, as you perhaps know, and a very high opinion of your merit; but not even an old maid's partiality can withstand the force of circumstances. If I don't take for granted all that Gilbert asserts about you, I can't shut my eyes to the fact that there must be more or less of duplicity mixed up in this miserable business."

She stopped; he had not interrupted her, though his impatience almost amounted to agony.

"Will you tell me where Sybil is?" he then asked.

"We need not debate that point, for it is neither in my power nor Gilbert's. The letter we received had been posted at the General Office, and our answer was to be addressed to the *poste restante* at the same place."

His eyes kindled. "Then it will be possible to write to her."

Sara smiled grimly. "It would be possible, of course, if you knew the initials under which we are to address her. You see, when a wife runs away from her husband she uses every precaution to preserve her concealment."

"I cannot jest," he said, almost sternly. "I do not suppose you can have any motive for keeping this vital point back from me?"

"I have at least the motive," she answered, sharply, "of not disobeying the commands of a brother, who can make himself very unpleasant indeed when he is offended, and the further motive that Mrs. Karslake herself is dreadfully afraid of being discovered. But," she added, looking at him steadily, "I have not forgotten what you did for us on that dreadful night, and I am going to pay back the debt we owe you. Write to her under the initials of the last three letters of the alphabet, and I suppose your letter will stand the same chance of reaching her as Gilbert's. Now, deserving or undeserving, own that I am as good as a fairy godmother."

He went to her and kissed her hand; there was a brightness and gladness in his expression almost more, she thought, than the occasion justified.

"You are my good angel," he said. "I ask nothing more."

"And does the mere opportunity of pouring your heart out to your wife bring back so much of the old look to your face? You are an enigma to me! But if what you write should reach the hands of my poor darling, I am content: she prays for news of you as starvation prays for bread. As regards my brother, I shall lie valiantly: your morality seems eccentric,—no doubt you hold that there are circumstances in life when a lie becomes justifiable?"

She spoke at hazard, with no knowledge that her question would bear to him a painful personal significance. He answered it, however, without any change of countenance, but with a grave solemnity that made her again look at him curiously.

"Yes," he said, "I do hold that opinion, under great reserve. The occasion does not come perhaps more than once in a century, nor to one man in a thousand. I should hold you inexcusable for deceiving your brother on this point."

Sara raised her eyebrows. "I like the sternness of your morality,—for others! But I will not dispute ethics with you; I will do what you will like much better: I will go away and leave you to write your letter to Mrs. Karslake in peace. I think it should not be delayed."

"And will not you relent sufficiently towards me to drink a cup of coffee? It is beginning to snow; you cannot go away just yet."

He poured it out and brought it to her with so winning a grace that she could not resist it; at least, this was what she said to herself. But, in truth, it was a grateful relief to her to linger in that pleasant room instead of returning to her own cheerless domicile, and, at the same time, to satisfy her womanly instincts by the close observation of the man who at once attracted and baffled her. That he was inwardly counting the slow progression of time with almost intolerable anxiety, could never have been guessed by the gracious friendliness of his hospitality. He was pleased to be able to induce her to eat, knowing well she had the delicate and capricious appetite of an invalid, and, while affecting for her encouragement to do the same, was sensible that the excitement under which he labored, and the idea of action he had conceived, had effectually destroyed any inclination for food.

At length she took her departure, and he was free to follow his own will. He sat down and wrote his letter at once, more swiftly and briefly than might have been expected, and then went out immediately to deposit the same in the post-office.

At that period, the interior of the General Post-Office had not been enclosed; the central hall was still open at both ends to the streets, and the bureaux of the different departments were ranged on either side, to the right hand and left of the visitor. It requires no long stretch of memory to recall the exact locality of the office in which Karslake was interested.

He deposited his letter, and then took a deliberative walk round the area of the building. His plan was to maintain a strict oversight of every person who approached the *poste restante*, and at the same time to escape, as much as possible, attracting attention to himself. He had taken the precaution to make the cover of his own letter specially characteristic, so as to be able more readily to detect it when given into the *hands of the applicant*, and it was the somewhat desperate hope of witnessing this consummation that was animating his mind with a thousand delicious hopes of advance towards the recovery of his happiness. He had defined his course of action; he would accost the messengers without hesitation, and extract from them by some means or other the secret of his wife's concealment.

But the office was open from ten A.M. to six P.M.; it was then about one o'clock. Also, it was just possible he might be too late,—that Sybil had signified to Helstone at what hour his letter should be posted, and that hour might already have passed. The doubt was an overwhelming one, but impossible of solution: nothing was left but the necessity of keeping watch till the hour of closing.

This, too, was a matter of great difficulty. To patrol the interior of the post-office for a number of consecutive hours—perhaps even for one—would soon make him an object of attention to the police, and ultimately of inquiry and interference. His movements would be less conspicuous were he to pace up and down St. Martin's-le-Grand, in front of the building, and keep a vigilant eye on every one who ascended or descended the broad flight of steps on their way in and out; but to have done this effectually, in the height of the day's pressure of business, would have needed not one pair of eyes but a hundred. Besides, had it been possible to make the espionage absolute and inclusive, there still remained the signal difficulty that those who went in at the principal entrance might possibly go out at the other end of the building, leading into Foster Lane, and thus defeat the very object of his anxiety.

The wisest course seemed a compromise. He would keep the interior of the building as long as feasible, going outside and making the circuit of it as circumstances seemed to suggest. But as the slow hours dragged, and his anxiety and disappointment deepened in intensity, he finally decided to risk the consequences of his pertinacity and keep his guard near the department itself.

During the time that had passed there had been only six applications at the panel of the same. Three of them had been young men, evidently foreigners, with something in their appearance that suggested the idea of mercantile clerks. and *only two of* whom were successful in finding an answer. A *fourth was* a fashionably-dressed, languid-looking man, who received a pink billet at the window and slipped it into his pocket with a yawn, and the other two were women.

These latter, not being quite sure of the result, Karslake ventured to address, his manner at once enlisting their sympathy so far as to lead them to a frank exhibition of their respective missives.

Also at this point, perceiving that he had become a mark of attention to the policeman on duty, he thought it best to appeal at once both to his sagacity as an official and his benevolence as a man, by taking him frankly into his confidence. The result was more successful than he expected. His clerical dress and air of distinction went some way, no doubt; but there was that in his manner and look that made it very difficult to question his veracity. The man shook his head slowly: if he had been a Frenchman he would have expressed the same feeling by a shrug. He committed himself, however, to no more definite expression of opinion than by saying,—

"Maybe, sir; but this kind of thing could never be allowed; we should have the place full of 'em! Leastways, you won't object to my keeping an eye on you."

But the long day ended in failure, and as the clock struck six Karslake left St. Martin's-le-Grand with a sense of profound disappointment and of almost intolerable fatigue, but resolute to renew the watch on the morrow, from the earliest moment of opening.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

At a quarter before ten on the following morning Karslake was again at St. Martin's-le-Grand.

As he went up the steps of the post-office, an elderly lady, tall, substantially dressed, and closely veiled, who preceded him, dropped the umbrella she was carrying.

As he restored it to her, the casual glance one bestows in such circumstances on a stranger was extended in her case to a lingering gaze of startled inquiry, but her face was too closely muffled for him to be aware of the fact.

Her eyes followed him with keen attention as he entered the building and prepared to recommence his weary promenade of observation. As the boom of the great clock sounded the last quarter before the hour, she took out her watch to compare the time, with a little gesture of impatience and shiver of cold that in his turn attracted his attention towards her.

She too began to walk briskly up and down the area.

Suddenly the conviction flashed upon his mind that the clue he sought was found,—that the stranger, like himself, was waiting for the opening of the *poste restante*, and that here, in this dignified and reputable personality, was the friend who had granted her generous protection to his wife.

He would, of course, wait to test his impression, though it seemed to possess him with the strength of a conviction, lest any precipitancy on his part should deprive him of his advantage.

The hour struck; the lady turned quickly and approached the department he was watching, knocked gently at the closed panel, and, after the interchange of a few words with the clerk, received two letters from his hand, one of which Karslake recognized as his own.

She walked briskly away, and was making her way out towards the remoter end of egress from the building, when he intercepted her.

"Pardon me," he said, and there was that in his aspect and voice which was calculated to arrest attention, "I am Julian Karslake."

Miss Harrison was not startled. His face had struck her at first with a sense of familiarity she had vainly tried to trace to its source; now the facts were clear.

"Yes," she replied, "you are Julian Karslake. I recognize that as a truth, but I do not understand why you make this gratuitous announcement to a stranger."

"You hold my letter in your hand; you are going back to my wife. What I ask is that you will give me leave to accompany you."

He was pale with intense excitement. The concentrated anxiety of the gaze fixed with baffled inquiry upon her veiled face was painful to encounter, but the inward agitation was rigidly kept in check. His external manner was so quiet as to attract no attention from the passer-by, and there was neither hurry nor incoherence in his speech. These circumstances commended him to her favor.

"Walk by my side," she said, "and we will talk as we go along."

She turned her steps in the direction of Cheapside, and began to speak to him in the midst of the din; but a Londoner has a practised ear, and as he bent towards her he lost not a single word.

"Your wife has been well cared for since the day she left your house. Her first night was passed under my roof, and, though I claim no gratitude from her, I consider you can never be thankful enough."

"You are right," he answered, quietly; and though Miss Harrison stopped, as if from the deliberate intention of keeping his anxiety in suspense, he waited patiently without further comment till she thought proper to resume.

When she spoke again it was to ask,—

"What do you mean to say to your wife, granting that I consent to bring you together?—to humble yourself before her?—to ask her forgiveness?"

His heart so leaped within him at the admission of her words that he scarcely perceived what was implied in the secondary inquiries. Miss Harrison repeated them, however, with some variation of phrase.

"Mind," she added, looking at him sharply, "I am not judging you by the character given you by Mrs. Karslake, but according to my own knowledge of the world. The knight (or parson) *sans peur et sans reproche* is a character that has never yet crossed my line of vision, and my experience tells me always to distrust a generous woman's vindication of her husband. No one will persuade me there is not wrong somewhere, when a girl like Sybil Karslake thinks it her duty to run away from her home."

"And has not your experience of life taught you that the wrong and the suffering do not always go together?"

She smiled. "So far as my own sex is concerned, yea, verily it hath, but not as regards yours. However, I will not push you too hard, and where we can scarcely hear each other speak. You will try and persuade Mrs. Karslake to come back to you?"

"Yes!" he answered, and his face flushed and kindled at the thought of the ineffable compensation.

"Remember! I will not have her coerced," said Miss Harrison, authoritatively.

"I shall try the full coercion of love and reason; no other."

"*Sans peur*, at all events," she said, as if to herself. Then aloud, "Nothing is to be gained by keeping you longer in suspense: will you call a cab for Waterloo Station? I live at Esher, so that you will be face to face with your wife in little more than an hour. You can be the bearer of your own letter," handing it to him as she spoke. "This, from her other friend, I will deliver myself, and for the rest it is too cold and too noisy for further conversation."

She folded her innumerable wraps close about her, and settled herself as if for sleep, first in a corner of the cab, afterwards of the railway-carriage; but her keen eyes never drooped beneath her veil, but kept up their vigilant scrutiny of her travelling companion without rest or fatigue.

Arrived at Esher, she bade Karslake follow her at a little distance.

"Sudden grief is dangerous in its consequences, but sudden joy is possibly worse, in proportion to its intensity; and this foolish young wife of yours adores you. I will prepare her for seeing you."

She left him standing outside the fence, within a few paces of her garden-gate, while she went swiftly forward and entered the house.

She was not absent more than ten minutes, but it seemed to his sorely-tried patience more than an hour.

"Come in," she said, on joining him, in a voice that shook a little with agitation. "You have kept your parole strictly, and deserve to be rewarded. All is well," she added, looking up kindly into his pale face; "she does not know you are on the spot, but I have prepared her to see you soon, and she has rushed up-stairs, whether to compose her mind or adorn her person I am not quite sure; but the coast is clear for a time, and I can smuggle you into my parlor."

Karslake grasped her hand in speechless gratitude, and Miss Harrison twinkled the tears from her eyelashes.

"I have been a man-hater all my life," she remarked, "but I am inclined to think there may be exceptions to my estimate."

By this time they had reached the pleasant, cheerful room into which Sybil had been first welcomed, and now, as then, the large, lavishly-heaped fire was dispensing warmth and brightness around. A little work-table stood near, from which it appeared some one had precipitately risen, for the embroidery silks were scattered on the floor, as well as a little volume which Karslake immediately recognized as belonging to his wife. He stooped instinctively, and gathered all up with tender reverence, scarcely able to forbear pressing his lips to the covers of the familiar book.

Meanwhile, Miss Harrison was hospitably intent on producing wine and biscuits from an old-fashioned cellarette.

"Drink this," she said: "it will not hurt you, even at this time of the morning. It is priceless madeira, though I say it who shouldn't, and has made more than its one voyage to the Cape." And she handed him a generous bumper of the pale golden fluid.

Karslake, as a rule, never touched wine, but he would scarcely have refused a glass of poison from the hands of their benefactress, or have returned an ungracious denial to her kindly hospitality.

He took the glass with thanks, sipped it critically, and praised it with discrimination, while every sense was on the strain to catch some sound in the house that might indicate his wife's presence or approach.

"Will you not let her know I am here now?" he asked, at last; "or is it possible for me to go to her? You need not fear I shall lose my self-command."

"I hear her step at this moment," said Miss Harrison: "she is coming down-stairs. I will trust to your discretion and leave you to receive her alone."

She rose with secret reluctance as she spoke, for, in fact, she had a strong desire to be a witness of their meeting, a desire which was unexpectedly to be gratified.

As Karslake opened the door for her departure, Sybil had laid her hand upon it from without, and the two thus stood immediately face to face.

There was a moment's breathless pause, during which the eyes of each searched the face of the other with a brief glance of passionate inquiry as to the effects of absence. Then, with a swift, gliding motion, graceful as a swallow's flight, Sybil flung herself upon his breast, clasping her slender arms about his neck, and lifting her pale, tender face to meet the kisses he pressed upon it.

She looked so white and seemed so speechless that Karslake, fearing she would faint, took her in his arms and placed her in Miss Harrison's huge cushioned chair, close to the fire, kneeling at her feet and chafing her cold hands in his. He forbore to overwhelm her with his caresses, or to urge her to give him the dear delight of hearing the sound of her voice; but the very intensity of her emotion, by showing him how much she had suffered, quickened his own feelings almost to agony, and made him resolve, with renewed energy of purpose, that no earthly power should part them again.

He was going to rise to fetch a little wine from the table and induce her to taste a few drops, but she retained him by a movement of her trembling hands.

"Do not move! Do not leave me!" she murmured; and then a sudden and unusual passion of tears burst from her eyes and shook her with convulsive sobs, but brought her at the same time a qualified relief.

Karslake held her in his arms, soothing and caressing her with quiet tenderness, till the paroxysm had subsided and she was able to lift up her bowed head and look at him.

"Julian," she said, pausing on the name as if to exhaust its sweetness, "I have lived a lifetime since we parted last! How could I leave you?—say, you have suffered too?"

"I could not say; I have never dared to ask my own heart how much I have suffered."

She gazed at him with some return to the sweet gravity of her ordinary expression.

"And yet now that I see how pale and worn you look, I wish I could have borne my suffering alone. But one question: you understood why I left you? You never doubted,—were never angry with the step I took?"

"Never, never! I always accepted it as the proof of the highest devotion, Sybil, on your part, of which, on mine, I was little worthy. But for all that, beloved wife, it is a sacrifice that has run its course."

"Is it so?" she asked. The fine carmine tint peculiar to her moments of deepest excitement tinged her cheek, and a gleam almost amounting to rapture shone in her eyes. "Is Gilbert Helstone's malice exhausted? But you would not have come to me otherwise: it would have been too cruel a mockery."

"To come to you with any other idea than to hold you forever in the future, would indeed have been too cruel a mockery for either of us," he answered, with a tender smile, "but I own I have not taken into account the state of Mr. Helstone's feelings. Believe that there is but one thing in the world—the secret pledge by which I am bound—to which my love and duty to you would yield. So far, dearest, this has not been required of me. For the rest, there is no disgrace so absolute, no social ruin so shameful, that I would not endure it rather than your loss. Life will never be too hard for me so long as I have the approval of my own conscience, and the blessed encouragement of your hand in mine."

His face kindled as he spoke: she drew a heavy sigh.

"I don't feel quite as you do. I cannot be so brave and self-sufficient for you as you are for yourself. Shame and ruin are words I cannot bear in connection with your name; but we will leave that an open question for the present. Sit down now, and tell me all that has happened to you since I went away."

He obeyed, relating to her with perfect accuracy what incidents had occurred, but saying little or nothing of the feelings which had been involved. Two points also he suppressed,—the scene with Helstone's maniac mother, and the denial given to Mr. Dorrimore's question. Here he judged that even to her silence and secrecy were best.

"How much you have had to bear," she answered, when he had finished his story, "while I have been sheltered from every annoyance from without! One wishes sometimes it were possible to gauge sensation. I have a foolish desire to know that you have felt my loss with the same ceaseless, corroding pain as I yours; your mind has been diverted by so many serious anxieties. There are new lines, or at least deeper lines, on your face than when I kissed you farewell on that sad morning,—a look of sternness I never remember before——"

"Because I have lacked the tender spell of your influence and sweet example. Without you I should grow cold and hard, still doing my routine duty, but in a mechanical and *worthless way.* Never leave me any more, Sybil, for there have been moments—hours, rather—during your absence when I have been almost tempted to curse God and die. I have a task to fulfil to which flesh and blood seem at times unequal. Put away forever from your mind the notion that you can help me otherwise than by standing with me hand to hand in the struggle."

He suddenly took her in his arms, and strained her against his breast with a passionate abandonment almost unknown to her before.

"Promise me," he urged, "that nothing but death shall part us henceforth!"

At this moment Miss Harrison's loud, cheery voice was heard approaching the room, and the next she knocked at the door, and entered without much pause for permission.

"I am come to tell you," she said, approaching the fire and breaking the huge blocks of coal with a vigorous hand, so as to give the young couple the opportunity of recovering their composure, had they lost it, "that dinner is ready. Not lunch, Mr. Karslake, but dinner in all sincerity, at two o'clock in the day. Also, the only summons recognized in this household is when the hands of the clock point precisely to that hour, as they do now. Sybil, my dear, I hope your husband has brought back the appetite you have lost so long."

"I think we are both desperately hungry," said Sybil, casting a look of covert entreaty towards Julian, for she knew her good hostess's weak point. As they went from one room to another, she managed to whisper,—

"For the sake of all I owe her, try to eat her dinner and praise her wine."

In actual experience the interlude of dinner was a salutary relief to all. Miss Harrison's *cuisine* was simple, but excellent, and she was one of the most lively and influential of hostesses; it was almost impossible to resist the vigor of her hospitality and the infection of her example. Karslake found, greatly to his satisfaction, that he was able to respond to her cordiality with much less difficulty than he had expected, and fairly to justify his wife's assertion. The truth was, he was not himself aware how long a time had elapsed since he had eaten a substantial meal, nor how far this unrecognized physical exhaustion served to exalt and intensify his mental condition.

At present, at all events, we are all closely beset and sorely harassed by our corporeal substance, and our heated brains cool and disordered pulses throb more equably under the healthy stimulus of recruited powers than under the urgency of the most strenuous moral endeavor.

Miss Harrison, with her keen perceptive instinct, reached pretty accurately the facts of the case, reduced them in her own mind to the opinion that both husband and wife were sacrificing their health and happiness equally to some ethical chimera, and purposed to have it out with them both in the quiet, restful, comfortable hours between dinner and tea.

Surely, considering the part she had played in the little drama, she was entitled to their confidence.

With this purpose in view, as soon as dinner was over she led the way back to her favorite sitting-room, establishing Karslake in a chair almost as ample and luxurious as her own, and suggesting that Sybil should take the ottoman at his feet.

"In my opinion it is a reversal of the natural order of things," she said, smiling, "but for the present, at least, men are our only masters and legislators; and I am afraid the best women among us still love to have it so."

"If I am in any way a docile and obedient wife," answered Sybil, caressing the hand she held, "it is against the bias of my nature. I have been subdued by the abstinence from all authority and the sweet suggestiveness of example."

"My dear child, as a sister woman I must protest against such palpable flattery, all the more as I see, from the coolness with which it is accepted, that Mr. Karslake is used to the incense and thinks it is due. But we will have done with banter, for I am anxious to come to business and satisfy my curiosity on some important points."

"And I," replied Karslake, quickly, "am still more anxious to hear under what circumstances you first met my wife, and how my debt of gratitude to you began. I have not as yet even attempted to thank you. It is useless to make the attempt: words are not adequate to express what we owe you."

"So be it; I am quite willing to allow you owe me a great deal, but this goodness of mine has been its own reward. I have found a friend and companion in Mrs. Karslake, pleasanter and dearer than a long life had given me before; and now, I suppose, in recognition of my services, you will propose to rob me of her society, without compunction?"

"Not without compunction, but none the less I must take her away. You will find your happiness in restoring ours, only it will be something deeper and fuller than mere restoration."

He bent over his wife as he spoke, as if these last words were only meant for her private ear; and there was something in the juxtaposition and expression of the two beautiful faces, with the mutual interchange of candid and steadfast glance, that touched Miss Harrison's sensibility very acutely.

Who that looked at the man could believe him hypocrite or impostor?

"I wish," she said, "if we are to be, as I devoutly hope, friends for the future, you would trust me with the story of your separation. Mrs. Karslake has always been reserved on the causes that led to such a result, and they exist in my mind in a very vague and phantasmal form. I should like to hear a coherent statement of them from yourself. I conclude they exist no longer, as there now seems no question in her mind about the duty and practicability of returning to her home."

Sybil looked distressed; all the serene sweetness of her face, so marked a few moments before, yielded at once to an expression of trouble and unrest. Karslake, on his part, answered with utmost composure.

"You are mistaken. Nothing has happened to change the absolute position of our affairs, only I hope my wife has given up the protection of my good name at the cost of our happiness: rather, I shall take effectual means to prevent the repetition of the sacrifice. As for the story itself, it is perplexed and wearisome, and one it is hardly possible to tell myself, unless my doing so is to be the proof of my gratitude and the condition of your friendship."

"Precisely," responded Miss Harrison, whose curiosity refused to be longer balked. "It is scarcely fair to take my good will captive, as you have done, without letting me judge for myself how far you are entitled to it. Trust me with all the details of this formidable accusation; let there be no gaps or omissions in the narrative, and then perhaps the judgment and advice of a clear-headed woman may not be without value to you."

She drew in her chair as she spoke, with too obvious a manifestation of zest and attention, which only served to deepen in Karslake's mind the almost insuperable reluctance he felt to enter upon the disclosure of his most secret private affairs with a stranger, however importunate or worthy.

At that moment, and with a grateful sense of relief, he heard the door-bell ring. His hostess heard it too, but with a feeling of strong disappointment and annoyance.

"Few as are my friends," she said, sharply, "and scarce their visits, I always remark that they pitch invariably upon the hour and the day when I least wish to see them. But whom have we here, Martha?" she added, taking the card from the tray which the servant, who had at that moment entered the room, handed to her with the awkwardness of an unusual formality.

There were a few words in pencil written on the card below the name. Miss Harrison read them deliberately, and then glanced involuntarily towards her guests.

"There is nothing to be done but to show the gentleman in here," she said to the woman, and then in a lower tone to Sybil, "My dear, we have played our part but badly in this pretty comedy. Your poor little letter, with all our clever precautions, has brought both your correspondents upon us."

She threw the card into her lap as she spoke, and at the same moment Martha reopened the door, and admitted Gilbert Helstone.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

To explain the appearance of Gilbert Helstone on the scene, it will be necessary to go back a little. Mrs. Karslake had endured the long anguish of her suffering till the pain had become insupportable.

She had once told Gilbert Helstone, in the days of her early gratitude and friendship, that she had not much capacity for heroic endurance, and possibly she was right in her estimate of self. At least she had not the energy of her husband's resolution; but it also must be admitted that she had not the *same paramount* inducements.

The thought of the pain and grief she must have inflicted augmented her own a thousandfold. How would they tell upon the sensitive and finely-balanced organization she had learned to watch and analyze with so delicate and acute a perception? How long was this unreasonable martyrdom to be exacted from each?

And not this alone. Was she to submit to an indefinite separation from all the members of her family, in whom her strong and tenacious love was so strongly bound up? Was she to inflict the pang of vain regret and tender yearning upon each beloved little one, whose face brightened at the very mention of her name, and upon the lonely, uncheered father to whom she owed so much? What must have been the cruel dilemma in which she had placed Julian when Mr. Dorrimore questioned him on her behalf! what the childish despair of the nursery in the old house at Ashlands when they were told she was lost to them, no one knew how!

Was it conceivable that the man who had been her life-long friend before marriage—her mother's kinsman—could determine in cold blood to protract this misery?

Surely, whatever his thirst for vengeance, it must be allayed by this time, in view of the sufferings he had inflicted: possibly he only waited for her to make an appeal. And under the influence of this condition of mind she wrote the letter of which we have heard, in which she simply stated the fact that to keep the pledge Gilbert Helstone had required of her had become too hard a task any longer to sustain, and implored him to suffer her to return to her husband and her family without any prejudice to Julian's interests.

There was at once so searching a pathos and so passionate an appeal in what she wrote that it moved Helstone to the core of his being. But how was he moved? See him crush the letter in his strong hands and press it—scarcely conscious of the instinctive action—against the lips that worked convulsively. His whole frame vibrated with the thrill of his silent, intense, and jealous passion. What would he give for the tithe of the love she had lavished on this other man?—this other man, if possibly not so worthless as he thought him, at least fathoms below the estimate in which his wife held him!

She, the cold, proud, and reticent girl, who had been so reluctant to yield her heart, had finally surrendered it, as he always knew she would, with an abandonment that was nothing short of absolute. She could not live without him!

His beauty of person, his grace of manner, his subtlety of character, had subjugated and befooled the woman who would have been forever blind to his own single-hearted devotion.

But she should not go back to him,—at least, not without the step being followed by the postponed exposure of the guilt and contumacy of the husband she adored.

It was under the excitement and pressure of these feelings that Helstone had gone to the meeting which Karslake had summoned in the school-room, moved by the scarcely acknowledged intention of subjecting him anew to his deliberate judgment, or rather to his embittered scrutiny and criticism; but neither love nor hate could entirely destroy his faculty of reason and perception, and there was that in the complete self-command and impregnable dignity of the sorely-tried man that told unwillingly but irresistibly upon his mind.

It led to the half advance we have related already, the determined rejection of which on Karslake's part had served to fan into a fiercer flame than before the embers that were beginning to smoulder.

He had been a fool to doubt the evidence of his own senses for a moment. Karslake's last refusal under so supreme an inducement to clear his character was alone sufficient evidence of guilt, if all that had gone before had failed in conclusiveness.

Never, had he power to prevent it, should Sybil return to her husband! better any pressure of present suffering than the shame and dishonor of such a reunion.

He would save her in spite of herself!

The next morning, unable to fix his mind to work, Helstone had conceived the idea of going to Stratford, and questioning, without any restraints of honor or decency, thewoman whom Karslake's infamy exalted into a rival of his fond and infatuated wife. Her own simplicity of nature and her mistaken impression that he was a friend of her seducer would, he thought, make such a proceeding practicable and remunerative. He had seen her more than once since his first intrusion upon her privacy, owing to his desire to preserve relations with her that might be turned to account in the future, but a sense of honorable feeling had hitherto withheld him from *forcing any explanation* from her.

To-day he did not mean to be so squeamish. Under his guarded professional cross-examination, she should make such admissions as should silence at once and forever the effrontery of Karslake's perjury and the irksome intercession of his wife.

He went, taking some trifling present for the boy, but was disappointed in finding only him and the childish little maid-servant in the house. The mistress was gone out, the latter explained, but she did not know where, or how long she was likely to be absent, and he failed to extract any further information from her.

He sat down in the meagre little parlor, with some idea of waiting for Nell's return, and passively suffered the child to chatter to him. By nature he was a generous lover of children, but this special child excited an instinctive aversion he made no effort to overcome or conceal, the beauty of his person and the artless grace of his speech and gestures being so many points of vicarious condemnation and recoil.

He could not bring himself to entrap the unconscious boy into disclosures or communications, but he listened with a sort of saturnine disgust to his innocent prattle, in which occurred constant references, not to Karslake's name indeed, but to circumstances and actions which he felt morally convinced could be connected with no one else; and the profound antagonism was strengthened every time Harry raised his beautiful, large-lidded blue eyes to his face, or excited his contemptuous comparison by some sudden movement of body or turn of phrase.

Then a curious little incident occurred, that seemed to Helstone almost a foreordained interposition of Providence.

Harry was very eager to show him a new picture-book he had lately received, and which, from prudential considerations, had been put out of his reach on the top of a nondescript piece of furniture that the boy called a "whatnot." In clambering up to reach his treasure, he knocked down a heap of books that had been piled insecurely on the top of his own.

Helstone, with an involuntary movement of good nature, rose and went to the spot to help him to repair his blunder. In so doing he could not help perceiving that one of the scattered volumes was a Bible, which had fallen in such a way as to expose the fly-leaves to view, and that on one of these was an entry in Nell Trevelyan's handwriting, which he recognized at once as identical with that which he had seen on the covers of Harry's small library.

He took it up and read it with breathless eagerness, for his keen, casual glance had shown him of what stupendous importance to his purpose it was likely to prove.

It was such a memorandum of domestic incident as the worthy heads of families were wont to make within the covers of their Scriptures; but in this case, alas! it was a mother who was no wife who had penned the humiliating entry.

It ran thus:

"*Aug.* 10, 18—. My beloved little son was born."

"*Aug.* 30, 18—. He was baptized, *unknown to him*, Julian Harry Karslake, at St. Pancras Church. In this way I have given him the name that ought to be mine, but is not."

It was signed "Nell Trevelyan," and the memorandum was blotted, perhaps with tears.

Helstone grasped the book, and looked round to see how his little companion was engaged. He was intent upon his new picture-book, with his back towards him.

Swiftly and deftly, making no sound, but with a face ghastly with agitation, he cut out the leaf from the volume and conveyed it into his pocket.

What more did he want? Had not heaven itself placed conviction in his power,—conviction that would close the question of reunion forever?

He strode out of the house, with his brain on fire.

Sybil divorced and possible of attainment,—that was the deadly lure that led him on.

But he was premature in saying this was enough. He would add yet one more point of damning evidence: he would go to St. Pancras Church and search the register, and then—?

He devoured the distance between him and this new goal by calling a hansom and paying the man munificently for extra speed. Again heaven or fortune seemed to favor him. The church was open for a wedding just concluded, and he had no difficulty in inducing the clergyman, who was just then taking off his surplice in the vestry, to allow him to search the baptismal register under the plea of professional investigation, presenting his card at the same time as pledge of his good faith.

The vicar himself assisted his search, and, being certain of his date, now more than five years ago, the page was easily found, and the confirmation he desired stood before his eyes.

"*Aug.* 30, 18—. Julian Harry Karslake; Nell Trevelyan. Stratford-le-Bow."

Helstone involuntarily covered his eyes with his hand, lest he should betray too much to the casual observation of his companion. It was a relief to his overwrought feelings that the vicar went on talking.

"My parish," he said, "is almost beyond all bounds of absolute knowledge, and at my monthly baptismal services you would be astonished at the crowd of children brought in. Although I know quite well that many of them are not parishioners of mine, I ask no questions; it is a principle with me to turn no child from the font. Would you like a copy of the register?"

Helstone could scarcely command his voice to reply with sufficient composure. He was overwhelmed, not only with the completeness of his own success, but with a deeper feeling of indignation and loathing against the matchless baseness of Karslake's treachery. Would Sybil be able to bear up against the overthrow of her passionate and magnanimous trust?

He roused himself, and, taking out of his purse a five-pound note, presented it to the vicar in exchange for the copy he had completed.

"For your poor," he said. "You have done a service to-day to the cause of religion and justice that I cannot sufficiently acknowledge."

He went back to the Temple, and sat down to collect his thoughts and arrange his plan of action. At that same hour his sister was with Karslake, and he was rejoicing in the measure of relief she had brought him. Truly there was no magnetic *rapport* between them. Helstone took slowly out of his pocket the profits of his morning's work, and read both documents over and over again. Then he made careful copies of each, and consigned them, with the originals, to different receptacles in his pocket-book. Next he took out Sybil's letter and spread it before him. He read a few lines, and then, folding his arms over the paper, bowed his head upon them.

There were tears of love and rage and pity in his eyes; a paroxysm of abortive fury shook him from head to foot.

He himself so helpless to comfort or soothe the despair and grief of the woman he adored: this detected and remorseless villain endowed with limitless power to crush her life and honor and happiness under his feet!

Would any amount of shame or ruin satisfy his vengeance?—anything short of the murderous instincts he felt springing into energy within him?

But it is enough to indicate, not to exhaust, the conflict of his spirit. When he came to a decision it was this: to reply to Mrs. Karslake's letter by begging her to appoint an interview with him, in order to receive an important communication which he had to make, and which could only be conveyed to her verbally. "On this hung," he wrote, "the question of reunion with her husband."

He despatched this letter to the *poste restante* by his clerk, and, in point of fact, Karslake saw the same deposited, though of course without any faculty of recognition.

Helstone further resolved to abstain from any decisive action until he had heard from or possibly seen Sybil. On reading over her letter again he noticed a point that had hitherto escaped him,—that she stated she should not send for a reply till the second day after its receipt. Then the obvious idea occurred to his mind, as it had done to that of Karslake, to watch the post for himself and try to discover and waylay the messenger.

He carried it out on the following morning, with less promptitude than Julian; but he was sufficiently in time to see Miss Harrison turn away from the office with letters in her hand, to observe Karslake approach and speak to her, and to follow on their track.

There was no difficulty in doing this. They were neither bent on haste nor on concealment, and had no suspicion of being watched. To call a cab and fee the man to follow theirs was easily accomplished. He took his place in the same train, without having come into contact with them, but thought it unwise to get out at Esher as they did. He went on to the next station, and waited for the up train to take him back again, employing the interval in a consideration and reconsideration of his plan of action. A revenge fuller and richer than he had ever dared to contemplate was in his reach, and he would utilize it to the utmost.

These precautions, and the slight difficulty he had in tracing Miss Harrison's house at Esher, brought him to the point of time at which he made his unexpected entrance into her sitting-room.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

As Gilbert Helstone advanced courteously into the room, Sybil rose instinctively from her seat, but not before he had marked the attitude of tender familiarity with a pang of jealous and indignant rage.

"Madam," he said, addressing Miss Harrison, "I can only excuse the liberty of my intrusion by explaining at once that, as Mrs. Karslake's relative and best friend, I am come to thank you for your friendship and protection, and to beg of you not to withdraw them at present, nor to hand her over to her husband's care until you have allowed me to make you acquainted with the facts of the case."

Miss Harrison bowed a little stiffly, but there was an air of sincerity and good faith in his manner that produced its effect, and she also did not fail to perceive the expression of pain and dread in Sybil's eyes, and the pallor and sternness of aspect that had banished the softness and sweetness from Karslake's face.

The little drama was more thrilling and intricate than she expected, and was to be played out without reserve. All the points of the case which had baffled her curiosity and distressed her genuine benevolence were to be cleared up, and she would be invited to assume the tempting character of umpire and judge.

"Sit down, Mr. Helstone," she replied: "the circumstances of our connection here are so unusual that we must all waive conventional formalities. But, before we go further, you must allow me to ask Mrs. Karslake if she recognizes you in the character of protector and friend?"

Helstone looked intently at Sybil.

"It is scarcely possible," he said, "that she can repudiate a regard that has been hers and her family's since her infancy, and that never was more sorely tried than now, when I have to choose for her between her welfare and her dishonor."

"It is true," replied Sybil, "that I have known Mr. Helstone all my life, and that he has been very good to me in the past, before my marriage. But it is unnecessary to go so slowly over the ground; you know my story, dear friend: this is the man through whom I was compelled to leave my husband, and who has already found us out to try and force us asunder again. All friendship between us is over. I do not know whether I hate or fear him most."

Her face kindled as she spoke, letting her proud indignant glance fall on Helstone's face. Then she drew back a few steps, so as to place herself beside her husband, and drew his arm around her, holding his hand firmly clasped in hers, he rather submitting than responding to the action. Helstone could hardly repress a groan of indignant pain.

"My dear," said Miss Harrison, "that you have the most implicit faith in your husband I do know perfectly well, and love enough to suffer on his behalf as few women are able to suffer. But you forget you have never told me the details of the accusation against him, and the grounds on which Mr. Helstone sustains them. Mr. Karslake was on the point of supplying this information when we were interrupted. Shall we hear first the plaintiff, and then the defendant in his own vindication, of the sufficiency of which I feel no doubt?"

"Mr. Helstone has his brief ready: let him read it," answered Karslake, in a hard cold tone.

"You are right; I have my brief ready, for I mistrust my own power of self-command, and wish to guard myself against running into protest and abuse. Here," drawing out a written document from his pocket, and preparing to loosen the tape that bound it, "is a careful statement of the guilt of which I accuse the Rev. Julian Karslake, and the evidence by which I support it,—such as, with a little important addenda, I should be prepared to read in the Divorce Court to-morrow. Shall I hand you the document?"

Miss Harrison colored and hesitated.

"A lawyer's brief is professionally illegible, and I should prefer the assistance of my ears rather than my eyes, only it is scarce reasonable to subject Mr. and Mrs. Karslake to the painful reiteration of what they know already. Will you like to go back into the dining-room while Mr. Helstone puts me in possession of the details?" she asked, turning towards them.

"Will you?" said Julian, addressing Sybil in a tone to which all the depth and sweetness had returned.

"I will do as you think best," was the answer.

"Then we will remain. I have heard from Mr. Helstone's lips much of the protest and abuse against which he finds it so hard to guard himself. A calm and deliberate statement is entitled to respectful attention."

He spoke coldly, but with both pride and bitterness carefully restrained, and Helstone clinched his teeth as if to keep in the virulent curse that rose to his lips. To see his enemy stand there, still maintaining his integrity and believed in by his wife,—encircling her with his arm as if she were some inalienable possession, and defying him to do his worst,—cost him a struggle to maintain his composure which resulted in the greatest triumph of self-control he had ever known.

But this time his overthrow could not be avoided.

"Then I have the permission of all the company to proceed?" he remarked.

Miss Harrison nodded, and by force of habit took up her knitting, but she soon let it drop into her lap, absorbed in the interest of the recital.

It was a simple and telling narrative of facts, without comment or deduction.

Helstone began with the first introduction of Karslake to the Dorrimore family, recording Sybil's original, and, as it seemed, instinctive, repugnance to his proposals, and the means by which this difficulty had been overcome. He remarked upon his own distrust of the excellencies with which the young clergyman was credited, and upon the unsuccessful attempt he had made to induce Sybil to reconsider the engagement.

He then proceeded to a judicial statement of the incident at the Crystal Palace, which, if he put it more strongly than facts warranted, it was equally true he reproduced according to his own impressions.

At this point Miss Harrison looked intently at Julian, with the hope of catching his eye, trusting to the keenness of her *faculty of* penetration; but he was listening with a fixed, set *expression*, and his gaze on the ground. She felt she learned nothing by her scrutiny: at the pain and suffering in Sybil's face, mixed with an indignant pride, she dared not look.

Helstone read on. He had woven all the details connected with the case into a consecutive narrative,—his different interviews of expostulation with Karslake, his refusal of all explanation, and his uncertain and evasive denials of guilt, his own vain attempt to break the match, his successful discovery of Nell Trevelyan, and the night scene at the child's sick-bed. The way in which he rendered all that had passed on this occasion—the observation made by the visiting surgeon to Karslake, as to his relation to the child, and the reply he had given, his inability to meet Helstone's reproaches, and his subsequent personal appeal in the Temple, when he found that his accuser was bent on exposing him—seemed to clinch the argument without appeal.

Here he paused and looked about him, which he had not done before. He had brought his written statement to a close, but he still held in his hands, unsuspected, a power of conviction and ruin to which all this, stringent as it was, was only introductory.

"These are the grounds," he continued, quietly addressing Miss Harrison, "on which I ventured to separate Mrs. Karslake from her husband. I believed him then, as I believe him now, guilty of the basest immorality and treachery, and that it was a stain on any woman's honor to continue to live with him. I own I should personally have preferred his public disgrace; but I yielded this point to his wife's magnanimous entreaty. Have you anything to say, any question to ask, or shall I go on to the end?"

"Is not this the end? Does not this bring matters to the point where I first made Mrs. Karslake's acquaintance?"

"Three months have passed since then," said Helstone, "and brought with them such additional proofs of the allegations I have laid before you as no jury in England will resist, and which so augment the baseness of his guilt, as to set me at liberty to cancel the promise I made his wife under an imperfect knowledge of the truth."

Sybil uttered a low cry as of intolerable pain. Karslake drew her closer towards him. Miss Harrison turned to watch them, and met the full expression of his eyes.

"*I cannot believe it!*" she exclaimed, impulsively. "It would be Satan disguised as an angel of light! But, more than that, I trust my instincts. It is not true!—Mr. Karslake, say that it is not true!"

"No," he answered, firmly, "it is not true. But I blame none for believing it, not even Mr. Helstone."

Helstone's face grew almost livid with suppressed feeling; this assumption of generosity was scarcely to be endured.

"I am not surprised," he said, in a low, harsh voice, that trembled with the weight of his restrained indignation, "that a generous woman like you, naturally susceptible to external impressions, should believe in Mr. Karslake. There have been moments when the perfection of his hypocrisy has even made me hesitate; but no such moments can return! There was a brief period when I considered the possibility of condonation, or rather when I doubted all that I have as yet disclosed, and contemplated the idea of permitting their reunion; but chance has prevented such a monstrous mistake. An enemy is biassed by his prejudice; the burning facts you already know might conceivably be explained away; but neither friend nor wife, nor his own stupendous faculty of lying, can resist the demonstration held in these scraps of paper."

He rose as he spoke, took out his pocket-book with a hand that shook with eagerness, and handed to Miss Harrison the copies of Nell's pathetic memorandum and the baptismal register.

Moved by uncontrollable anxiety, Sybil pressed forward to her side and looked over her shoulder. As she read, Helstone's gaze dwelt upon her face with an almost devouring sense of mingled passion and pity, watching the slow recession of every trace of color from cheek and lip, and the convulsive working of the muscles round the delicate mouth, as she stood motionless, with her eyes fastened on the paper, slowly absorbing the deadly poison of its contents.

He made a movement to approach her nearer, fearing she would faint, but this seemed to bring back her failing strength and restore her faculty of speech.

"Is this a forgery?" she demanded. "Julian, what answer have you to give to this?"

There was such a ring of agony in her voice, such despair in the eyes she turned towards him, as cut the sympathetic heart of her friend to the quick, and excited a feeling of impatient anger in her mind towards Karslake, who had not advanced a single step in order to possess himself of the intelligence on which his fate seemed to hang, or swerved for a moment from the stern composure he had preserved throughout.

"Look at these," she said, with asperity, holding them towards him as she spoke, "and then comfort her if you can!"

He took them almost mechanically. He had no conception of their nature or contents, and he seemed to withdraw his eyes with difficulty from his wife's pale and agonized face. He knew that of the three that watched him there was not now even one whose faith in his honor was not shaken.

There was a profound hush of intense suspense, as he at length seemed to gather himself together and cast his eyes upon these new evidences against him.

"I do not understand," he said, looking across at Helstone, and meeting the scornful repugnance of his glance with the same unflinching steadfastness. "These memoranda are in your handwriting: what do they mean?"

"The originals are here," he answered; and as he spoke he held them open under Sybil's eyes. "This, in Nell Trevelyan's own handwriting, I tore out of her Bible yesterday; the other is a copy of the baptismal register of St. Pancras Church, given me by the vicar himself. There will not be the slightest difficulty in testing their validity. Are they sufficient?" His voice broke with the weight of his triumph. "You have audaciously denied the evidence of the child's likeness to his father; you can scarcely repudiate that of the name with which the nameless mother has endowed him!"

Karslake crossed the room and caught Sybil in his arms.

"Are you a man," he said, in a voice that shook with indignation, "and can torture a woman's heart like this? Sybil, speak! tell me you believe in me still. And yet I see I ask for the impossible."

She made an effort to answer, but failed, and there was a movement as if she would have withdrawn herself from his arms. He placed her in the great cushioned chair near which they were standing, and turned again towards Helstone.

"Will you let me see the originals of those papers?" he asked. "You are afraid to trust them in my hands? I shall be quite satisfied to look at them in yours."

Helstone flung them contemptuously on the table. Karslake took them up and examined them carefully, then laid them down again with a firm hand.

"It is enough," he said, looking towards Helstone. "I exonerate you from any deliberate malignity in this matter: you could reach no other conclusion. Sybil, what would you wish me to do?"

He leaned over the back of her chair as he spoke, and was moved to lay his hand on the head bowed in her trembling hands, but he forbore. Miss Harrison watched him with acute attention.

"I would have you keep my heart from breaking, not from wounded love only, but from intolerable shame," answered Sybil, with a sudden rally of her firmness, and turning round so as to face him, with her wet and pallid cheeks and distended eyes. "If there is still possibility of belief left to me, I command you to explain and give me back my honor. To whom on the face of God's earth do you owe the duty you owe to me?"

"I cannot answer," he said. "Spare me, Sybil!"

"Have you spared me?" she asked, in a tone of passionate reproach. "You forced my love from me against my will. I married you in defiance of a doubt no other woman's faith would have sustained, and against which I have struggled up to this hour, but even my fond credulity can go no further. Inasmuch as I have loved you utterly, and believed in you even against the evidence of my own senses, do I now wholly repudiate you. If it is possible to break the tie that has tempted you to this extremity of treachery, I will do so." She rose and faced him as she spoke, her weakness dominated by her indignant scorn.

"It will be quite possible," was his answer. "Mr. Helstone will be at hand to instruct you how to act. To sever your life from mine is now as much my duty and desire as it can be yours. Such as I am should stand alone."

He went up to Miss Harrison.

"You are a good woman," he continued, in the same tone of quiet but unshaken resolution, "and will not, I think, refuse to help a man, even as disgraced and unhappy as myself. If I should need some friendly help in the settlement of my affairs in the future, may I dare to apply to you?"

Miss Harrison made a gesture of assent; her voice just then was not under command.

"For the rest," he continued, and for a moment he paused and covered his face with his hands, but it was rather from the instinctive desire to shut out the ruthless eyes that watched him, than from any lapse of firmness,—"for the rest," he resumed, "I wish my wife to understand that I still maintain my integrity in this matter, and hold myself as worthy of her love now as in any past time. I simply give up a struggle that has become too hard for me; but right rests sometimes with those who lose all else."

Helstone, who was watching Sybil intently, saw her shrink and tremble from the proud erectness she had assumed,—saw the lips quiver that had so lately regained their firmness, and the scintillation of her glance soften beneath the glaze of sudden tears.

"Who is torturing a woman's heart now?" he muttered. "Your acting is excellent, as always; but spare us, spare her, at least, any more last words. If your integrity is still so absolute, you will have the chance of proving it in court."

"I shall never make the attempt. You may depend upon success, for judgment will go by default; but you are right otherwise."

He hesitated, looking at Sybil with a grave, yearning intensity, infinitely more pathetic than the wildest outburst of passion. Then he went up to her and took her hands in his.

"I may at least say farewell, and wish you the happiness of swift forgetfulness, my wife, my love."

He strained his lips upon the hands that lay passively in his, made a gesture of adieu to Miss Harrison, and turned from the room.

There was a dead pause for the moment after his departure. They heard, in the breathless stillness, the house door open and shut upon him, and then Sybil, who had still retained her attitude of resolute dignity, relapsed, and, uttering his name with a cry of passionate appeal, sank fainting into Miss Harrison's arms.

"It is better thus," said the kind woman, yielding now to the tears restrained with so much difficulty. "Carry her to the sofa, and don't let us be in a hurry to bring her back to *her misery*."

CHAPTER XL.

It has been well said that in all strong and masculine natures there is a reactionary tendency in the extreme crises of human sorrow; at the point where weakness and selfishness would not only touch the condition of despair, but rest in it, these receive a recoil towards energy and resistance.

As Julian Karslake sat in his desolated home, and forecast his future, he acknowledged the prospect to be as barren and hopeless personally as could well be conceived.

He had not only lost the wife he adored, and with her a measure of blessedness such as few men taste in their conjugal relations, but he was the object of indignant reprobation to the woman who had proved herself capable of the highest magnanimity. His allegiance to one claim of fidelity had thrown discredit on every other action of his life.

The commonest instincts of loyalty and honor—nay, of truth and decency—he was held to have outraged, to a degree that went beyond the ordinary manifestations of moral obliquity.

Nor was his position one of mere mental distress and difficulty. It touched his public life and credit at every point. Whether his wife carried her wrongs into the Divorce Court or not, the circumstances which led to their separation would soon be noised abroad, or rather systematically spread by Gilbert Helstone.

The little world in which he moved would be invited to share the knowledge of his infamy and to swell the chorus of condemnation and disgust. There was not a hand that had clasped his, not an eye that had regarded him with favor, that would not now be withdrawn or averted.

He would be regarded with that special contempt which is reserved for those who have shamelessly betrayed a cause to which their fidelity has been voluntarily pledged. At his hands the creed he had maintained and the principles he had advocated would suffer incalculable wrong, while the power of retrieval would be lost to him.

He must not only resign his living, but every other *professional* avenue of usefulness would be closed to him.

He had thought at one period of his life of offering himself for missionary service in India, and the idea had occurred to him again during his late complications; but that was now out of the question.

His character and career would not sustain the necessary investigation. Missionary societies do not send out men whose wives have abandoned them on the gravest accusations.

If in the future he was to do any work for either God or man, it must be beyond the close fold of which he had hitherto been not only member but shepherd.

Nothing tests the spiritual vigor of a man like the hard necessity of standing up against the deliberate and conscientious condemnation of his fellows, of being forced to rest wholly upon the strength derived from the verdict of his own moral sense. Julian Karslake by constitutional bias was by no means a stoic; he possessed the large receptive capacities of a nature which although strong is also sensitive and tender. He had, in a word, that fine susceptibility to suffering without which patience and endurance become a mere mechanical exercise.

As the slow hours and days accomplished their course, it must be acknowledged that he felt at times as if the burden laid upon him was greater than he could bear, and also the question would often arise as to whether he should continue to bear it; and this not out of consideration to his own ruined condition, but because the interests and happiness of another were bound up in his life.

But the hesitation was brief and the conclusion absolute. That Sybil should suffer so cruelly through her connection with himself was indeed the sharpest pang in all his complex misery, but it was the outcome of events the occurrence of which it had been impossible to foresee, and for which it would therefore be unreasonable to hold himself responsible.

The piteous entanglement of circumstances apparently blind, contrary, and inexplicable, is part of the daily burden of poor humanity; but at the same time it has no power to relax the stringent claims of duty. The one subject that occupied Karslake's attention in these gloomy days was the consideration of what it behooved him to do under all conditions of his situation, and the best way of doing it.

In thinking of his wife he tried to believe that she was *young enough and* buoyant enough to rally from the blow she had received, helped by the potent aid of her wounded love and pride and honor. She had loved and married with a certain reluctance, and when the acuteness of her disappointment had subsided might possibly accept with tranquillity a return to her former mode of life. He thanked heaven that her strong family ties remained to console and interest her; he tried to thank heaven that a nature so chivalrous and high-minded as hers would scornfully repudiate the idea of spending life in one long wail over a lost love basely betrayed; but here he was scarcely successful. Nor, when he allowed his mind to rest upon the intense and tender passion she had manifested in so many crises of their mutual relations, was he much more successful in consoling himself with the belief of the evanescent nature of her love; but then he would not suffer his mind to rest upon these points: had he done so, his resolution must have collapsed, and that resolution had now taken definite form.

Within the last two days he had received a letter from his brother, under elaborate precautions of concealment. It announced his safe arrival at Auckland, and contained a demand for money to such a considerable amount as exceeded even Karslake's practised estimate of his rapacity. He stated that this time he had accomplished the voyage in safety, and that, moreover, the good luck that had so long deserted him seemed to be turning tide in his favor. He had found an unprecedented opening for making a fortune, if only Julian would do the right thing by him. He had negotiated the purchase of a store at Auckland, and enclosed a list of goods he desired to have sent out to him from England, besides the further amount of hard cash which would be necessary to clinch the bargain. His brother's ignorance of business need be no obstacle: any broker would manage the matter for him. He further instructed him to consider his request in the light of his future respectability, not to mention the oath that bound him, and warned him against suffering any paltry reluctance to part with the necessary funds to stand between him and such a result.

He went on to inform him he had adopted a disguise wellnigh perfect,—had stained his fair hair and skin, thereby only anticipating the action of a tropical sun, and grown a superb beard, which he privately considered was an additional point of beauty.

"You know," he wrote, "that without contradiction we are both consumedly handsome men," and wound up his letter by devoutly believing that if fortune and Julian did their duty by him he should do well yet, and settle down as a respectable colonial citizen and the father of a family.

And this was the man for whose sake the sacrifice of all that made life desirable had been exacted from him!

But the letter suggested a line of action, and supplied the definite scheme and motive of which he was in quest. He would leave England and follow his brother to New Zealand. He would accept implicitly and to the bitter end the charge of those interests to which he was pledged beyond redemption and at the given cost of every personal satisfaction.

And having reached this decision, he lost no time in taking the necessary steps to carry it out.

He placed his resignation in the hands of the bishop at once, simply stating that personal circumstances rendered it impossible for him to remain any longer in the responsible condition of a clergyman of the Church of England, and that his decision was final.

He also stated that he had already appointed a curate in charge till his lordship should make a fresh nomination.

This letter produced, as he expected, a kindly remonstrance, written under the impression that he offered his resignation from conscientious scruples arising from theological doubts or difficulties, and recommending him to weigh the matter well before deciding on so important a step, and to give the bishop himself the satisfaction of a personal interview.

"We cannot afford to lose such men as you," he wrote, "without an affectionate struggle to retain them."

It did not consort with Karslake's views to allow this idea to remain uncorrected. He accepted the invitation to Fulham, and there explained to the kindly but sagacious old man that he was not influenced by any such intellectual difficulties as he imagined: that his religious beliefs were the same as of old, but that a stigma rested on his private character, which it was out of his power to remove, that rendered his continuance in office a moral impossibility.

"More than this," he added, "I do not desire to say, and, since my resignation is already in your lordship's hands, more than *this I feel sure you* will not demand."

The bishop encountered the steadfast, level glance of the speaker, and paused in his reply. Presently he said,—

"Our official connection may be broken, but I may still speak to you as friend to friend, or rather, considering the difference of age between us, as father to son. If this stigma is undeserved, and of that I feel pretty sure, there must be some way found of righting the wrong."

"There is no such way," was the answer, "or I should have found it for myself. But your goodness encourages me to ask one thing: if the details of the accusations against me should ever reach your ears, recall to your recollection what has passed between us this day, and let it induce your lordship to withhold, or at least to mitigate, the judgment you would otherwise pronounce."

This matter concluded, nothing more was left to do but attend to certain monetary arrangements.

There was the painful necessity of seeing Nell Trevelyan again, and making final arrangements for her comfort and decent maintenance.

That by so doing he was only confirming the case against himself was no point of haughty or defiant indifference, but he regarded it as part and parcel of the work set before him.

His plan was to invest a certain sum in buying her a small annuity, which seemed to him the only adequate way of securing one so thriftless and inconsiderate against want and fraud; though, again, there was a serious drawback in the consideration that such an arrangement could not be effected without forcing their mutual relations into further publicity.

Having instructed his lawyer on the point, and put matters in train, so far as was possible, he went to Stratford to fulfil his last duties to the woman and child who indirectly were the cause of all his misfortunes.

It was no part of his intention to discuss with Nell Trevelyan the memorandum of which Helstone had possessed himself, or to question her respecting the baptism of her child; the idea had at one time been present to his mind of asking her what had induced her to bestow his name upon her offspring, and to expostulate with her on the point, but he abandoned it. What good would it do? She was moved, no doubt, by a feeling of gratitude that it would be heartless to reprove, and there was no opportunity of retrieval in her power.

The interview between them was protracted and painful, for the announcement that he was going to leave the country, and was come to bid her farewell, produced such a paroxysm of hysterical and unrestrained grief on her part as sorely tried both his sympathy and his patience. He could hardly induce her to listen to the arrangements that he had made for her welfare, for she was one of those women who lack entirely all practical capacity for the affairs of life, and who seem to think that the reiterated announcement "that they have no head for business" exonerates them from every obligation to personal exertion.

Another part of his duty was to impress upon her mind the necessity of keeping the secret of her lover's existence, and to this injunction he added another, that she should be faithful to the vows they had exchanged.

"Marriage, at present," he said, "is impossible, but it is an object, Nell, I shall always keep in view. Try and redeem the past by the future, so far as is in your power, and preserve at least your motherhood sacred and unstained. Don't fancy that your responsibility to your child is less because you are not wife as well as mother: to my mind, that makes his claims upon you doubly strong. I don't want to preach to you," he added, smiling kindly down upon the weeping girl, "but if I am able to send for you to New Zealand, promise me you will not be ashamed to come."

"Could you not take me with you now?" she asked, with that mixture of simplicity and ignorance which had been in part her undoing. "Harry could not resist me when he saw me, especially when I brought our darling to him, stronger and prettier than ever. Then you could marry us yourself, you see!"

"That is not practicable," he answered, quietly. "You must be content to wait till I know Harry's mind on the subject, though I grant it is very hard advice to give. I have thought, too, it would be better for you to leave this neighborhood, but would not decide without consulting you on the subject."

"You are too kind, as always!" sobbed Nell, and she would have snatched his hand and covered it with her kisses and her tears, had he not prevented her with a feeling almost akin to *hardness.*

"Harry's health is delicate," he continued, "and sea-air would no doubt do him good. Would you like to live at Hastings? I have friends there who would be willing to receive you as a friend, and where you would enjoy the advantage of pleasant society and kindly advice, should you need it. They would explain, or even manage for you, those little pecuniary matters you find so difficult. Also, you will have better opportunities there for sending Harry to school, which is becoming necessary."

Hitherto she had been all softness and docility, but her feeling for her child was intense, like that of an animal for its young, and in these last words of Karslake she fancied there was a threat of deprivation, of which she stood in secret fear. Her tears ceased suddenly; she looked up with a flash of indignation.

"Why is it necessary?—he is the best of boys! Perhaps you would like to take him from me?"

Such an idea had indeed occurred to Karslake's mind, for he had already perceived in the child manifestations of self-will and perversity, which painfully recalled the paternal characteristics, as well as the lack of firmness and discretion in the mother; but he had rejected it as bearing too hard upon her.

"Not at present, Nell," he said, gently, "and at no time should I ever have the right or the power to do so; only, as he grows older, you will very likely see the necessity yourself of putting Harry into firmer hands than yours. I shall always be willing to help you in any way I can. I will let you know where to write to me, as soon as I know myself."

He sighed involuntarily, and got up to go: it was all very dreary work.

"Your beautiful wife goes with you, I suppose?" said Nell. "I wonder you care to leave England: still, it is natural that you should wish to follow Harry. Remember, I shall count the time till I hear from you. You will plead for me with Harry?"

"I will do my best," he answered, and then, after a few more necessary arrangements, he went away.

That, too, was done.

It must not be supposed that in the distribution of his funds and his care for others the interests of his wife and her family were forgotten.

A fresh deed of settlement was prepared, raising her jointure from three hundred to five hundred pounds per annum, which was precisely one-third of his private income, and what he estimated was an equitable division of the same weighed against his other complex claims. Also, he left at her absolute disposal, either to sell or to hold, the costly furniture and art-treasures of the rectory house. No communication was to be made to her on the subject until he had left England. He had already discharged all the servants at his home, except the housekeeper, who had begged to remain with him to the last, and a favorite man-servant, who was willing to accompany him to New Zealand. His own outfit was prepared, he had selected the books and personal effects he meant to take with him, and then finally, with a reluctance that was nothing short of martyrdom, he secured his passage in one of the Orient Line steamers, which was to leave the London Docks within the next fortnight.

Before doing this he had obtained from his lawyer an introduction to a respectable ship-broker, not indeed with the intention of following out his brother's instructions on the spot, but with the view of establishing a correspondence in the future, should it seem to him, on personal investigation, that it was desirable or expedient to do so.

Then came the time when there was nothing left for him to do but to wait with what patience he had at command for the hour of exile; and, dreary and arduous as his labors of preparation had been, this period of enforced leisure was infinitely worse. In the day he could still busy himself in certain unostentatious work among the poorest of his parishioners, whose troubles he consoled and whose wants he satisfied or anticipated, without betraying to them what he thought the unnecessary information of his imminent departure. But when night came, and he sat alone in the deserted silent house, in the apartment so full of tender memories, physically weary perhaps, but with heart and brain oppressed with eager vitality, that was the time to test his courage and his constancy.

At such seasons it seemed as if there were scarcely a tender word Sybil had spoken, or a gracious act that she had done (and were not all her actions gracious, with a charm of delicate and gifted womanhood possessed by no other?), that his aching and almost reluctant memory did not pass in accurate review.

The yearning "for the touch of a vanished hand" that has loosed its hold of humanity, the hopeless anguish of "remembered kisses after death," are more tolerable than that restless hunger of the soul for what it has lost indeed, but not through the grim passage into the region of the unattainable. The recollections, too, of the rapture of delight and tenderness that had marked their brief reunion only served to exalt and deepen the bitterness of the contrast which that same day had presented.

The eyes that had met his, dissolved in passionate effusion, were the same that had glowed and kindled with such energy of scorn; the hands which had clasped his own and held him to her bosom in the very ecstasy of welcome were those which, an hour later, had lain passive and unresponsive within his despairing hold, even in the supreme moment of a last farewell.

More, all the sweet respect and loving recognition of their short wedded life were cancelled by the scathing words in which she had proclaimed her loss of faith.

Could he have retained her esteem, though love and possession had been denied him, his fate would have been tolerable in comparison; but the draught offered to his lips was of such unqualified bitterness.

At moments so crucial as these there was nothing to be done but to break the thread of despairing reminiscence by forcing himself into such occupation as required mental concentration, or on the other hand to relax the strain of endurance and passively suffer the full tide of suffering to flow over his soul.

CHAPTER XLI.

Helstone's triumph was complete. He had beaten his enemy at every point, and driven him finally not only from his wife and his profession—from the tender dalliance of love and social ease, and the honor and good will of men—but even from his native land.

As a parishioner of St. Mark's he could not but know what was going on. The resignation of his living, the changes in his household, and his imminent departure, were of course part and parcel of public report. Also, Mr. Karslake's housekeeper was intimate with Miss Helstone's parlor-maid, and naturally communicated all she knew of her master's proceedings so far as they came under her notice. It would have hurt very considerably the legitimate pride of Julian could he have known how closely he was watched by his servants, how much they guessed of what he thought he never betrayed, and how such irritating minutiæ drifted back to the ear of his cynical and ruthless foe.

But, happily for us, these things we do not know. Once or twice they had met in the streets, although so complete was the way in which Karslake ignored him, or so great was his preoccupation, that Helstone was not quite sure of his recognition. As usual, there was something in his aspect that inflamed his irritation against him. He looked pale and worn, it is true, but there was nothing of the abasement of mien he had expected and desired to produce. His gait was as erect, his glance as clear and steadfast, the lines of lip and brow as firm and resolute, as ever. If there was less of sweetness there was more of dignity in his face.

Again the idea flashed across his mind, "Could it be possible he was making a mistake, after all?" but he dismissed it instantly. The evidence was too conclusive, and his own discomfiture would have been too absolute. Only, he would have given much not to have owed his own life to the courage and coolness of the man.

He had not failed to notice, as Sybil had done, the scar on Karslake's hand, even in the full tide of his triumph under Miss Harrison's roof, and for a moment it had arrested the words on his lips and almost made him halt in his purpose.

True, he had conquered the feeling as a womanish sensibility, but all the same the remembrance of that deadly struggle, which must have been mortal but for his interference, brought a confused sensation of pain and shame to his conscience. At least it would inevitably keep the incident green in Karslake's mind, and must mix an element of contempt with his hatred of his persecutor not pleasant to consider.

Another point that vexed him was the absence of all cordiality towards himself on the part of Miss Harrison.

He had gone again to her house a few days after the bitter scene of exposure and separation he had effected, to inquire after Mrs. Karslake's health, and also to sound her friend, as the more practical woman of the two, as to the propriety of taking the necessary steps to bring the case into the Divorce Court with as little delay as possible.

Sybil he did not see at all. "She was not ill, but averse to company," was the answer Miss Harrison gave him; and on introducing the other object of his visit he was both astonished and indignant to discover that both women had cooled considerably towards the idea.

"If my poor young friend should seriously incline to take this step, of course she will consult you at once; but at present her mind is not at all made up on this subject. I think you may rest satisfied, Mr. Helstone, with what you have already done."

"Would you have had me do less?" he asked, harshly.

"I am not quite sure," she answered. "You see, she believed in him implicitly and was happy, and so it seems he was with her. I am talking now as a woman of the world, not as a moralist. What good did it do to rake up this miserable story, the chief events of which occurred, if I have mastered your statement, not only before his marriage, but even before he ever saw his present wife? As for telling me you act in the interests of truth and virtue, I am scarcely simple enough to believe that: you are gratifying a personal enmity."

"I should almost have thought," he said, sarcastically, "that you had passed the impressible age that would find Karslake's good looks and good manners influential over truth and right."

"And who says I am influenced by them? Though, let me tell you, a woman is never too old to appreciate the absence of the same, or to fail to resent a reminder that she begins to take rank with the patriarchs. Moreover, I am not so positive as you that we are on the right tack, after all. Your facts seem conclusive enough; but many a man has been hung unjustly on circumstantial evidence without a flaw."

"In that view of the case," he answered, "you will probably lend your influence to induce Mrs. Karslake to return to her husband and share his exile."

He spoke with such concentrated bitterness that Miss Harrison looked at him with renewed suspicion.

"Exile!" she repeated, quietly: "what do you mean?"

"I mean that Julian Karslake himself accepts his conviction. He has resigned his living, and ships for New Zealand next week."

Miss Harrison remained silent, but her warm heart went out in a tender effusion of sympathy towards the unhappy wife. As soon as Helstone was gone, she sent up a message to her, begging her to come down-stairs. She did not follow her strong inclination and go to her herself, for she knew Sybil objected to any intrusion, however friendly, on the privacy of her own room.

"I will come immediately," said Sybil, in reply to the servant, but she still sat for some time longer in the same chair, as if lacking energy to move.

Her friend had said she was not ill, nor as yet had mental suffering undermined the strength of her superb physical organization; but the pallor of her cheek, the dark circles round the sleepless eyes, the drawn lines of the mouth, and the tension of the brow, indicated a condition to which pain and sickness could have given little additional weight.

At first the struggle in her mind had been on the ground of her own self-contempt: she could not forgive herself for clinging with such passionate tenacity to the love bestowed upon one so unworthy. At any cost to her human weakness, she must cease to love him.

Vain and abortive decision. Her pusillanimous heart refused to yield to the mandate of her outraged honor. After she had summed up all the mass of evidence against him, retraced with despairing accuracy every detail of Helstone's succinct and formidable statement, and her reason pronounced for absolute and implacable condemnation, she still found herself dwelling with tender ingenuity on contrary and extenuating circumstances, and clinging against hope to the hope that he might yet be innocent.

It was such measureless and incomprehensible baseness! This was one point by which she held.

But yet, again, what conceivable complication of circumstances could induce a man to stand in such close and intimate relations as had undeniably subsisted between him and Nell Trevelyan, except under the alleged explanation? or a woman *with deliberate intention* to endow her child with his name without a melancholy right to do so,—a right, indeed, she had specifically claimed? And, insufferable as was the recollection, had not her own shrinking eyes borne witness to the fact?

Then, on the other hand, she would recall the unfaltering constancy and consistency with which he had asserted his blamelessness, and the silent argument of his fair and self-forgetful life; and thus the weary round of mental conflict went on.

She had taken off his miniature, and thrown it in the recesses of her box; but what did that avail when every night after her door was locked against intrusion she would kneel beside it, draw forth the locket from its concealment, and fix her weary, drooping eyes in stern contemplation upon it. To put it back again with the same proud forbearance, without one pressure against lips or bosom, cost her a struggle, but hitherto the struggle had been successful.

When she went down-stairs at last, in obedience to her friend's summons, she found her in her accustomed chair with her perpetual knitting in her hand. There was something very restful to the unhappy girl in this quiet, homely position of things. She sat down opposite to her.

"Mr. Helstone has been here," she said: "please tell me all he said."

"It is for that purpose I have sent for you, my dear. You would wish me to be quite frank?"

Sybil's heart sank within her: what further disclosures awaited her? It was with difficulty she made a gesture of assent.

Miss Harrison had dropped a stitch, and was busy in recovering it: the truth was, she dreaded to launch the news she had to tell at her pale, stricken companion.

"You will not, I think, be much surprised to hear," she began at length, "that Mr. Karslake intends to give up his living?" and, as there was no reply, nor any sign of special agitation, she added rapidly, with an abruptness that was characteristic,—

"Mr. Helstone says he has made arrangements to leave the country and go to New Zealand; but that, of course, requires confirmation."

"*And* he and you consider this as a tacit confession of his *guilt?*"

The voice was so strained and unnatural that Miss Harrison threw aside her knitting and looked at Sybil with her keen but sympathising glance.

"I do not think it conclusive either one way or the other, but I have a strong inclination to see Mr. Karslake again and take upon myself to dissuade him from adopting such extreme measures. It would do no good, I dare say,—I do not expect it,—but it would be a satisfaction to my mind to have the chance of making observations and drawing conclusions again. Have I your permission?"

Sybil could not speak, but she stretched out her hand and clasped that of her friend.

"Then we will consider that matter settled. Ideas and suggestions have occurred to my mind that were naturally smothered under the weight of Mr. Helstone's clinching arguments and the sad excitement of it all. Face to face with your husband, I think I could probe his sincerity to the quick, or at least my manipulation would be different from the manipulation of your other friend. Mind, I do not say I doubt his guilt, for the assertion seems unwarranted in the face of the evidence we have; but I incline to believe in the existence of some very extenuating circumstances."

Sybil raised her head with an imperious gesture: a flash of fire lighted up her heavy eyes.

"None such could exist for me. If he is not absolutely innocent, he is absolutely guilty. There is no measure or degree of extenuation possible."

"Well, well," said Miss Harrison, smiling, "forgive my having accredited you with any relenting softness. I will take care of your dignity. I will go to town after dinner."

When she was dressed for departure, she came to kiss Sybil and bid her good-by. It grieved her kind heart to see the attitude of passive dejection in which she was sitting, and the absence of any attempt at employment. It had not been thus even in the first days of their friendship, when the pang of separation was at its freshest and keenest. But then the corrosive anguish of injurious wrong had been lacking.

Sybil looked up and read her thoughts in her face.

"Yes," she answered, "you must have a little longer patience with me. I shall rally in the end, so far as to resume work and take up my old home interests. But at present I cannot work, or read, or scarcely think: I can only suffer. I would have laid down my life to preserve his honor: now that I have been taught he is without honor, my life seems only a burden to me. But that will pass."

"My poor darling!" replied Miss Harrison, tenderly; but Sybil interrupted her:

"Don't give me credit for too much tenderness. It is not only that my love lies bleeding,"—with an attempt at a smile,—"but my pride is cruelly hurt at having been duped, and deceived, and led blindfold by that irresistible appearance of goodness. Conceive what the humiliation must be, to have poured all my being at his feet without shame or reserve, because he was so pure and so high-minded, and to discover that no woman was ever more basely cheated and betrayed!"

"I grant it all, my dearest girl: the wrong would be so matchless that one doubts the possibility. In this case there is a very stiff *if*, in my opinion, which I am bent on putting to the test to-day. Keep up the fire and wait tea for me. You have no message, of course?"

"None!" but she threw her arms round her friend's neck, and strained her against her bosom with passionate emotion "God bless you," she whispered, "and reward you for all the mercy you have shown to me!"

CHAPTER XLII.

Miss Harrison made her way direct to St. Mark's Rectory, having taken her instructions from Mrs. Karslake, and there met with a considerable disappointment. The master of the house was not at home.

"I will wait," she said. "When do you expect him?"

"He dines at half-past seven: he will not be home probably before then."

She hesitated, inwardly anathematizing his late hours. But could she return to the girl she had left in her agony at home, and not have seen him?

She was introduced into the library, that being the only room where there was a fire burning, and for some time she was fully occupied in making observations upon all that surrounded her.

And this was the home that each was abandoning! this the position of cultured ease he was giving up—for what?

While she was revolving this question impatiently in her mind, she heard the welcome sound of a latch-key being applied to the street door. None but the master of the house would be likely to avail himself of this privilege: after all, she should not keep Sybil waiting for her return so long as she had feared.

A moment after, the door of the room where she sat opened, and Julian came in.

Miss Harrison had risen and advanced to meet him, kindly solicitous to lessen the surprise or even the shock her unexpected presence might produce; but she observed that he only started slightly at the recognition, and seemed in full possession of his self-collectedness.

"At last!" she said. "I have been waiting to see you a long time. Will you not shake hands?"

"That is as you please," he answered, gravely, taking the outstretched hand. "Is Sybil well?"

"Are you?" she asked. "She is about as well as you are, to judge from your appearance; but I had better tell you at once I have not brought any message from her. I am come simply on my own account. Oblige me by sitting down: I want to talk to you."

"Pardon me," he said, coming close up to the fire, so as to be nearer to the chair from which she had risen, and which she was about to resume, "but I would rather stand. That means, I would rather decline the discussion of my private affairs, if that is the object you have in view. It could answer no good end: the final words have been spoken on the subject."

"Oh, if you are obstinate, there is of course an end of the matter. I was afraid I was come on a fool's errand, but I was willing to risk my personal discomfiture for the chance of carrying home a morsel of consolation to your unhappy wife. My idea was that the time that has elapsed since we parted might have brought you to a better mind, and inclined you to discuss with an old woman of the world like myself the possibilities of confession and forgiveness."

"I *am deeply sensible* of your goodness, but I must remind you that there can be no confession or need of forgiveness where there has been no guilt. These, of course, are mere words on my part, of no weight or value whatever in the face of Mr. Helstone's statements, and I only repeat them as a satisfaction to my own self-respect, not in any forlorn hope that you will believe them. As for my wife, the only consolation it is in my power to offer for the shame and suffering I have unwittingly brought upon her is a life-long expatriation. Tell her I will in this way do my part towards meeting her wishes. All my arrangements are made: I leave England for New Zealand next Wednesday."

"I hope," she answered, sarcastically, "that the sea-voyage will do you good, for you look very ill, and that Mrs. Karslake will appreciate your efforts in her behalf. By the way, you do not seem to take into account that by thus running away from your disgrace you set the seal upon it and rob her of the last shred of doubt."

"I did not know a shred remained. You heard what she said: her condemnation was absolute. But that is not the point in question. I freely acknowledge that I am a beaten man, stripped alike of honor and of happiness. I accept my position, for which I claim no credit, for I merely surrender what I have no longer the power to retain,—wife, profession, home, and country."

"And all the while, your sense of injustice is so strong that you will not trust yourself with the most distant expression of it. But do consider how impossible it is for any one to believe that you would accept this position if you were blameless of the charge against you and could prove your blamelessness! Come, Mr. Karslake, trust all the truth to an old woman like me, who is bent on doing the best for her friend! So far as I understand Mr. Helstone's story, all this wretched entanglement dates back to a time not only before your marriage, but before you even made your present wife's acquaintance. I am talking now as a woman of the world, when I say it is hard to be punished so severely for the sins of one's youth. Why don't you withdraw your vain denials and throw yourself on your wife's clemency? If you can fairly assure her of your fidelity since marriage, and explain away these curious and *compromising* interviews, all might yet be well. You don't know the length and breadth of a woman's toleration."

He smiled slightly.

"You are giving me a powerful illustration of it when you are able to show so much generous kindness to a man of whom you entertain such an opinion as you do of me. Pardon me, however, if I say that a woman who could condone such offences would never have been friend or wife of mine. I have no fault to find with Sybil's complete repudiation, believing me the shameless liar and impostor that she does; so far from that, I would not wish her to act otherwise." He paused: the strongest desire of his mind at the moment was to escape or curtail this controversy, it was so cruelly useless. Miss Harrison broke the silence promptly.

"But you reproach her, nevertheless, for her loss of faith, though to believe otherwise than she does, in the face of the facts laid before her, would not be a question of confidence but of credulous unreason."

She looked at him sharply as she spoke, expecting some indignant disclaimer; but he showed no inclination to contest her words. He seemed to wait patiently for her to continue, but she was bent on having an answer.

"Tell me," she said, "if I am not right in saying you blame your wife for her present attitude towards you, in spite of the ample justification of circumstances."

"I do not blame her," he replied, in a low tone: "her character and conduct are now, as ever, perfect in my eyes. I do not ask her to forgive me, for it would be impossible for me to plead guilty to her convictions; and I acknowledge that the pain she must feel in thinking of me as she does must even be greater than mine under her condemnation. Promise me you will not withdraw your friendship from her. Your thorough knowledge of all the circumstances of the case will make your sympathy of double value and effect; and I am going to ask something for myself. Will you write and give me news of her sometimes? a mere bulletin will suffice,—just stating if she is well and, as time passes, happier."

She looked at him with keen, impatient sympathy. How thoroughly he succeeded in holding under control the emotion that would have mastered a weaker nature!

"I will not pledge myself to such a correspondence; but if you write on your arrival in the colony, perhaps I may answer your inquiries. Why have you pitched on New Zealand?"

"Why one spot of the antipodes rather than another?" he asked, quietly. "It is necessary to make a selection, and I need not enumerate to you the proverbial advantages of the climate and resources of New Zealand. I have not very sanguine expectations of my experiences there, but you will easily perceive that all channels of usefulness are cut off from me in this country, and I am at least resolved to try and prevent my life from running wasted through my fingers because of personal failure and loss."

"You go alone?" she asked, abruptly: "I mean, there will be no extraneous outside influence to help you to new energy and consolation? Do you pretend not to understand me, or to feel outraged by so natural a solicitude?"

"Whatever I might feel," was his answer, "any expression of resentment or indignation would be out of place, considering the opinions you hold and the belief you have accepted. Still, I hope you will accept my assurance that Nell Trevelyan is not to be my companion."

Miss Harrison sighed impatiently. "What am I to believe or how act in this dilemma? Your voice and look and speech pour contradiction upon your guilt: no villain or hypocrite yet ever played his part to such perfection. A solution occurs to me. Some friend whom you think yourself bound to screen has sheltered himself under your name in his relations with this woman, and thus drawn you into inevitable but unwilling intercourse. Ah! have I hit the mark? you change color. Admit my sagacity."

"I do," he answered, with the same unmoved composure; "I admit it freely; but you are none the less mistaken. But will you now consent to release me from this cross-examination? It is my fixed purpose to withhold the explanation that would establish my innocence. I do not think it is yours needlessly to distress me. Also, I want to thank you, as I have never yet been able to do, for your sweet charity to my wife when she left me broken-hearted. Continue it to her in the future; do not let her leave you till—she is a little comforted. You will find it easier, I dare say, to console her now than then; and God knows I would wish her consoled at any personal cost."

Miss Harrison was deeply affected: the absence of all demonstration on his part touched her far more than complaint or protest could have done. She dashed away the tears from her eyes.

"And am I to understand that you mean to put the ends of the earth between you, without making any effort to see her before you start? Are you quite sure that to abandon the woman who still loves you is the best reparation for past unworthiness? Have you no last appeal or prayer for sight of her again, to send back through me?"

"No," he replied, firmly: "the bitterness that is worse than death has been endured already, and I do not even desire to see her again. I would subject neither of us to such useless torture: I could not trust my own courage and firmness under the renewed ordeal of her reprobation and her tears. What good would it do to send her some reiterative assurance of the fidelity she distrusts, or mock her scorn and alienation with protestations of my own unchanged and unchanging love? She will forget me the sooner if she continue to think me unworthy. You will refrain from saying anything to her that would needlessly excite her sensibilities?"

Miss Harrison rose to depart. "All that goes without asking," she replied, tightening the knot that fastened her heavy fur cloak, and drawing down her veil. "For my part, so bootless has been our interview that I think I shall be wise to tell her that I have not been able to see you. I will wish you *bon voyage.*"

"But you will allow me to see you to the station? and," his duties as host suddenly occurring to his mind, "you will surely take something to eat before you leave the house?"

She laughed a little sarcastically. "Your hospitality comes rather late. I will eat nothing under your roof, thank you, nor at my age do I want any protection from one end of the world to the other. Order your servant to get me a cab: that is the limit of the service I require."

She allowed him, however, to put her into it when it arrived, and give her orders to the cabman; then, holding out her hand to bid him good-by, and retaining it while she spoke, she added,—

"I will, after reflection, grant your request, so soon as you let me know where to address you. That is, I will not fail to give you news of your wife when—she is consoled."

CHAPTER XLIII.

TIME is finite, and many of us daily thank heaven that it is so.

The days and longer nights ran their slow course, until the Monday preceding the Wednesday of his departure arrived.

Had the strain upon his endurance been much longer protracted, he acknowledged to himself he could not have borne it. Even now, with his ordeal reduced within the term of thirty-six hours, he began to feel the strength of his forbearance slackening, and the desire to see his wife once more before he left her, possibly forever, assume all but uncontrollable proportions.

He did his best to wear out his physical strength on the Monday evening, before he returned home to sit down to the scarcely-tasted dinner, in the hope that exhaustion might produce sleep, the only chance of forgetfulness. He left the dining-room, where he had not allowed a fire to be lighted, and went back to the library.

The familiar room had never looked so forlorn. Owing to some inadvertence or misunderstanding, the fire had gone out and the candles had not been lighted; his favorite lamp, which always stood on the writing-table, burned, as if in sympathy with its surroundings, with a dim, inadequate light. The floor was encumbered with packing-cases, placed there for temporary convenience, and over which he stumbled as he went in.

He paused and looked round him with a shudder: the room seemed haunted with ghosts,—the ruthless ghosts of memories of the days that are no more.

Following an instinct of fatigue, he flung himself on the couch, and, yielding to another impulse, equally imperious, he took up the soft crimson blanket which had lain there ever since the day of Sybil's flight, and buried his face in its folds.

How long he lay there, outwardly motionless, but with the inward consciousness of relentless mental activity,—tracing back the sweet brief past in tender recollection, and projecting upon his reluctant imagination the arid and distasteful future that lay before him,—he did not know; but his attention was aroused at length by a gentle knock at the door.

He started up from the couch before he gave the necessary permission to enter, and stood erect, with some sense of displeasure, to face and dismiss as soon as might be the unwelcome intruder.

The door opens slowly, as if with reluctance or hesitation, and—is it his imagination that plays him false?—it is Sybil that enters, Sybil that approaches him with the swift, undulating, familiar motion, as he stands rooted to the ground. She is not in walking dress, as might be expected, but, except that she is deadly pale, and her eyes heavy with tears and vigils, has the sweet accustomed domestic aspect.

So absolute is his bewilderment that all his practised self-command gives way. He lacks the power to advance a step or even to pronounce her name, while she, having reached his side and looked into his face, suddenly sank at his feet and threw her arms round his knees.

"Julian, forgive me!" she pleaded. "I am come back, back to the old love, the old belief. You will not reject me?"

He bent over her and tried to raise her in his arms, but his agitation overpowered him, and she resisted the movement.

"Let me kneel a moment longer, and confess my fault. I doubted the honor I had tested, the goodness I had proved. I believed for a few miserable days that I was the most basely betrayed of women! But it is not so, my love, my darling! I do not need your assurances, only it is not so?"

She raised her beautiful pale face, alight with the enthusiasm of her recovered trust.

By this time Karslake had regained a measure of firmness, and a full perception of the situation. He saw that she had gained no new lights, that her return was simply the result of the reaction towards her former conviction of his integrity. It was therefore possible for him to accept his blessedness fully, implicitly, without detriment to honor or conscience.

"It is not so," he said, repeating her words as she desired, and with the same clear, tender inflection as of old. He was calmer than she, now that the first shock of emotion was over. "You are the only woman I have ever loved, loved now as never before."

He raised her from the ground, and for a moment their lips clung together in a passionate embrace.

"Renew," he said, "the old promise made at the altar, the promise I asked for in vain on the day of our last meeting and parting,—nothing but death shall separate us any more. Sybil, you have given me back more than life; say again you believe in me!"

"With an inflexible belief," she answered, with a tearful smile; "a pledge once broken, but that shall never be broken again. Julian, I have nothing to ask of the past or the future; I do not stipulate nor even wish to remain in England. I am willing to go with you to New Zealand."

For a moment his brow clouded, then cleared.

"That sacrifice I shall scarcely ask of you, but to-night I am not able to consider the future: the present is all I can grasp. It is really you, Sybil, my sweetest wife, my fondest friend! I mean, you are not a wraith, a vision of the brain, such as has tempted me almost to madness at times? It is real flesh and blood I hold?"

"So real," she answered, with a swift recurrence to the unselfish tenderness and sweet solicitude of their former relations, "that I am beginning to be conscious of cold and hunger. I left Esher some hours ago."

She saw the extent of both his physical exhaustion and mental excitation, and was anxious to relax the strain. There was something infinitely pathetic to her mind in his present rare and passionate abandonment, in contrast with the consummate self-restraint he had manifested in all the cruelly trying circumstances of the past.

A sense of deep compunction for her involuntary disloyalty strengthened within her, but she would not express it. It was her object now to soothe, not stimulate, his sensibility.

"May I ring the bell?" she said, rising from his side, "and try and introduce a little comfort into our arrangements? I should very much have liked to make you some coffee and toast you some bread, so as to join the links of the chain of our broken intercourse; but you have put that out of my power. We must submit now to have it sent up from Mrs. Norris."

She moved about the room as she talked, reducing things to order with the old inimitable grace, while he, leaning back on the couch, watched her with silent, rapturous delight.

There are some joys worth purchasing, even at the cost of the inexpressible pain they had each endured.

CHAPTER XLIV.

SYBIL KARSLAKE's return to her husband's roof, under the influence of her restored faith and quickened love, withdrew at once from his life that element of bitter personal wrong and disappointment which, though courageously borne, had been so hard to bear; but it was not able to do more than this. He had indeed recovered what he most esteemed in life, but he had not recovered any new power of disarming Helstone's malice or circumventing his efforts for his overthrow. He fully understood that the fact of their reunion would be held to forfeit the concession won at so cruel a cost from Helstone's persistent enmity, and that the persecution which had been for a time suspended would be at once renewed, probably in a spirit of still more determined hostility.

His outward life, with all its fine possibilities, was none the less irretrievably wrecked because his wife had consented to share his downfall.

He was just as little able now as before, if he would preserve inviolate the obligations of his bond, to take any steps towards the defence of his own honor. Simply, he must accept his defeat and surrender a contest in which it was denied him to put forth his strength.

Moreover, he had already made arrangements for the future which it was difficult or impossible to undo, and which would involve a total change of place and position.

It was part of the hard necessity laid upon him that he must tell his wife that she must consent not to go to New Zealand indeed, but to follow him far away from his late sphere of work and high consideration, and to take part in the certain suspicion and uncertain disgrace which would undoubtedly rest on his name.

This he did on the day following their reunion, with that characteristic blending of solicitous tenderness and personal resolution which Sybil had always found so difficult to resist. No thought of resistance or even of discussion was now present to her mind: she accepted the sacrifice demanded of her with an absolute satisfaction, her chivalrous nature going *out to meet and welcome* the demand made upon it.

"Simply," she said, "where you lead I follow. I submit implicitly to your decisions; and nothing will wound my conscience more than that you should think it necessary to justify to me any course of action you may think it right to pursue. I will win back your faith in me by a perfect obedience, that not only asks no questions but wants no information."

He seemed to weigh her answer before he spoke, and then he said,—

"Some women would say this, Sybil, under the idea of having their words met with tender protest and repudiation, but I know you speak in good faith. The proof that I shall give of my belief in you is to take you at your word, and accept all the devotion you offer."

"And that is all I ask," she answered, brightly.

This conversation had taken place over the breakfast-table, so anxious had Julian been to open the subject of his present position and plans without a day's unnecessary delay, and learn in what way her judgment and feelings would incline.

At the same moment his servant brought in a card and handed it to him, saying,—

"I have shown the gentleman into the library. He said you would be certain to see him."

Karslake nodded assent, but Sybil's quick eye detected an indefinable change of expression in his face. When the man had left the room he turned to her and handed her the card. It bore the name of "Mr. Robert Anstruther."

"What will you say to me," he asked, "when I tell you it will be necessary for me to see this man alone?"

"That I am destitute of the curiosity of my sex," she answered, smiling. "Do not keep him waiting: I heard his voice in the hall, and am sure he is not a man to be trifled with."

He took her hand and kissed it with that sort of intense recognition of her generosity which always moved her deeply. Her eyes followed him out of the room with a yearning, wistful look: after all, a mystery between husband and wife is hard to bear, in spite of mutual magnanimity.

Karslake entered the next room, and found his visitor pacing impatiently up and down the floor. On the opening of the door he turned sharply round and looked at him curiously.

"You keep late hours, Julian Karslake," he said, in a loud, harsh, but not unkindly tone, "and forget that I am a man of business. An hour late on 'Change may make the difference of some thousands to my pocket. What is the meaning of this?" kicking the packing-cases with his foot as he spoke. "I have been absent from England just eighteen months, and find things all at sixes and sevens on my return. With whom were you speaking in the other room just now? voices were low, but my ears are keen: it was a woman's voice!"

Karslake looked surprised. "It was to my wife. You have not forgotten that I am married?"

"Your wife!" repeated the other, with an air of angry impatience: "does it run in the blood, and are you playing me false in your turn? I was told last night your wife had left you: what am I to believe?"

Karslake hesitated. "Before I answer, will you be good enough to explain what you have heard, and from whom? Had I known of your return——"

He stopped; he had been on the point of saying that in that case he should have made him a confidant of his affairs; but a second thought recalled to him the difficulty and danger that would have attended his doing so. He changed color under Mr. Anstruther's angry scowl of baffled comprehension, and recognized with a sort of desperate patience that the toils of his miserable position were about to be twisted into fresh complications.

Mr. Anstruther watched his face with close attention. Then he said,—

"I am come this morning to find out the right and wrong of what I heard last night. You know my detestation of all shuffling and double-dealing: the inquiry I am here to conduct shall be sifted to the bottom. Will you bring your wife in and make us acquainted? Since you say she is on the spot, it is well that she should hear all that passes between us. Lord o' mercy, man, can it be that you hesitate?"

He did hesitate, but he knew his reluctance must yield to necessity. He went back to the dining-room and told Sybil she was wanted. His manner was as usual, but she could detect beneath it the indications of some great anxiety.

"It is Mr. Anstruther," he explained, "my former guardian. He is just returned from America. I must have mentioned him to you, I think."

Her belief was that he had never done so, but she would not express it, and they went back together.

Karslake presented his wife with an air of tender pride no mental perturbation was sufficient to repress, and the old Scotch merchant was secretly impressed with the beauty and manner of the pale, distinguished-looking girl.

After having made her some old-fashioned compliments, to which Sybil replied with a winning grace that completed the conquest of his good will, he again turned sharply towards Julian.

"I am no gossip-monger, as you know, and moreover had an impression that you at least might be trusted to manage your own affairs with decency and credit. I only returned from New York yesterday morning, and last night went to the house of an old friend to ask and answer questions. Here I chanced to meet a man you know, Gilbert Helstone, who was able to give me all the information concerning you I was anxious to get. It was not of such a nature, I grant, as I expected: he told us an astounding story of your married life. One item I already perceive was incorrect, and yet he had every appearance of speaking in good faith. It is an extraordinary muddle. One question: is it true you have given up your living?"

"It is quite true."

"And the reasons?—but I will wait till the man comes. I engaged him to meet me here in your presence at eleven o'clock, to investigate the matter properly. He fails in punctuality."

Sybil drew a deep breath of intense excitement: she scarcely ventured to look at her husband, as he answered,—

"You heard Gilbert Helstone guilty of the baseness of making my private affairs a matter of public discussion, and you have asked him to meet me in my own house!"

"I have. It appeared to me the quickest way of discovering the truth, to bring accuser and accused face to face: it is not worth while for you to resent the intrusion. If to report facts that have become matters of public notoriety be a baseness, there are few among us not guilty of the same. But I hear the door-bell; let us have him in without delay."

"It will not be necessary for my wife to remain?"

"Pardon me, again," returned Mr. Anstruther, "but it will be eminently necessary."

As he spoke, Helstone entered the room, with a certain assumption of contemptuous ease he was inwardly far from feeling; but any sense of embarrassment yielded at once to the shock of surprise with which he recognized the totally unexpected presence of Sybil.

Mr. Anstruther perceived it, and gave a short laugh. "One of your facts of last night, my dear sir, is already disproved. I find the injured wife, who was about to proclaim her wrongs in the Divorce Court, on the best possible terms with her husband. How do you explain the discrepancy?"

For a moment Helstone gnawed his lip in savage silence: how, indeed, could he explain?

By what subtlety of fraud had she been won back again? for that she was won back was certain from the glance he had intercepted as passing from her sweet eyes to Karslake,—a glance eloquent of tender encouragement. His feelings towards him were those of impotent fury.

"I cannot explain. I am simply confounded. It seems like some infernal witchcraft. Ask him"—with a brutal oath—"if she had left him, and why? In her presence he can scarcely forswear himself."

"It is quite true," said Karslake, firmly, "that my wife had left me, under the impression that I had deeply wronged her,—an impression produced by Mr. Helstone himself. Since then she has recovered her belief in my innocence of the charges he brings against me, and which I have never failed to assert. She only returned to me last night."

There was a moment's pause; then he added, in a lower tone, approaching Mr. Anstruther and involuntarily laying his hand on his arm in the extremity of his suppressed anxiety, "Let this explanation suffice!"

Sybil looked at him in painful surprise: she had never seen him more deeply moved. Although he succeeded as usual in commanding his voice to steadiness, the workings of his face were beyond the power of his self-control. She perceived, too, that both Mr. Anstruther and even Helstone were perplexed by an appeal that could only produce the effect of deepening suspicion. The latter burst into a mocking laugh.

"Spare him," he said, "as he entreats. His nerves are unstrung, and it is a pity that his wife's ears should be vexed with a thrice-told tale. God! how I loathe the exhaustless perfidy and hypocrisy of the man, and deplore the inconceivable blindness of the girl! Contact with him has spoiled her sense of honor."

"Silence!" shouted Mr. Anstruther, in an authoritative voice, as he marked the involuntary shrinking of Julian, and saw the look of proud defiance with which Sybil changed her position in order to place herself at his side.

"A light breaks in upon my mind," he continued. "You have no need to repeat the scandal, Mr. Helstone. You gave it to us at full length last night, with all the aid of realistic detail, and I own I was puzzled and my faith in the man shaken. But one point in honor you suppressed, the name of the mistress. It now occurs to me that I can supply that omission, and perhaps let in daylight upon the mystery. The solution did not offer itself to me before."

He looked with angry impatience towards Karslake as he spoke, anxious to meet his eyes, but without effect.

Helstone repeated the word "solution!" with so venomous a sneer as to add fuel to his indignation. He turned upon him sharply.

"It seems to be a matter of personal satisfaction to you to prove Julian Karslake a liar and a villain. You will possibly think it strange, Mr. Helstone, but I have an older knowledge of the matter even than yourself: my acquaintance with Nell Trevelyan dates nearly five years back."

Helstone started. "And you can still keep terms with her seducer, who has doubled his guilt since then, and betrayed a nobler woman to a deeper disgrace!"

Anstruther shook Karslake impatiently by the arm.

"What is the meaning of this farce?" he demanded. "You suffer a girl like your wife to listen to such taunts, know yourself accredited with the parentage of Nell Trevelyan's child, flouted with its monstrous likeness to yourself, and do not speak the one word that would clear you! By God, you deserve to be left struggling in the mire!"

"Leave me there," said Karslake, in a low, suppressed voice: "it is all I ask. My wife believes in me, I have ceased to care for any other judgment. I beseech you, forbear any attempt at explanation!" He spoke in a tone of almost desperate entreaty.

Mr. Anstruther continued to gaze at him with increasing *displeasure* and suspicion.

"There is more here," he said, "than shows on the surface. No lunatic would give up his living and hand over his character to the tender mercies of his enemy, besides, worst of all, torturing the heart of the woman he has married, on the inducement I suppose you to have. I refuse to hold my tongue unless you assure me you have made a clean breast of it to Mrs. Karslake and put her in absolute possession of the facts. I am more indifferent about your relations with Mr. Helstone. Has he done this, my dear young lady?" bending with kind solicitude to catch Sybil's low answer.

"My confidence in him is complete," she said. "It is unnecessary to say on what it is grounded."

"I think otherwise," he answered, gravely. "You are upheld now by mere temporary excitement; in cold blood the force of what Mr. Helstone has told you will sink into your mind and disturb its peace. You returned to your husband, I am told, last night, under one impression; you may leave him again a week hence, under another. I will put a stop to such fluctuations: it is the old life-story, which has moved my disgust more than my admiration a hundred times before,—Julian, the honest and good, making himself the scapegoat of his worthless brother!"

There was a moment's profound hush. Helstone held his breath under a rush of feeling he was unable to analyze. Sybil looked up with a rapturous smile into Karslake's face.

"For your sake I rejoice; for my own, I could not have been better satisfied."

He stooped down and kissed her solemnly, but he did not speak. Why was he still so pale, and apparently so little relieved by the removal of this infamous stigma? Both Helstone and Anstruther gazed at his stern, set face with baffled comprehension.

"Your husband's behavior is incomprehensible to me, my dear young lady," said the latter. "I am told he accepted even before marriage the onus of his brother's fault, and has continued to do so till now, at the risk, nay, at the positive loss, of what all men hold dearest. And this not only for the most thankless reprobate that ever drew breath, but for one whose untimely but welcome death had put him out of the reach of praise or blame. On this point," he added, turning suddenly upon Julian, "I insist upon an explanation. You are neither fool nor madman: why did you not speak the word that would have spared all this false accusation and disgrace?"

Karslake raised his eyes boldly, in defiance of inward sinking of heart, and looked steadily first at the speaker, then at Helstone, who was sitting at the table, his chin propped on his hands, and his gaze riveted on his face.

"My motives were sufficient for myself, and, as the matter now stands, it would be a work of supererogation to discuss them. One only I have wronged by so doing, and she has forgiven me; to no one else are any explanations due."

Then, addressing Helstone, not from any prompting of personal feeling, but from the stringent necessity of diverting Mr. Anstruther's aroused suspicion, he asked,—

"Are you satisfied?"

"I am satisfied that I must shift my conviction of your dishonesty from one point to another: my belief in your fundamental insincerity is as firm as ever. Only on the condition of some rational explanation of this practical imposture shall I change my opinion."

Karslake preserved a haughty silence. Helstone maintained his scrutiny of his face. Suddenly he turned towards Mr. Anstruther.

"An idea strikes me," he said. "There is something worse to conceal than this vulgar crime of profligacy and desertion. If Julian Karslake has submitted to this imputation, it is to shield himself from the detection of some more serious transgression. He and his brother were doubtless associates in fraud. Are you sure that the latter is dead?"

Karslake neither started nor changed color, but he must have been more than human not to have betrayed by some indefinable subtilty of expression that a blow had been struck upon his sensations, and the perceptions of the man who watched him were exceptionally keen. A cold cynical smile parted his lips.

"He has deceived you," he said, quietly: "his brother is alive."

At his first suggestion the strongly-marked face of Mr. Anstruther had undergone a change. Hitherto he had preserved a sort of impatient toleration of Karslake, but at these words a look of hard vindictiveness came into his face. His rugged cheek blanched with the strength of his emotion, and his eyes glittered with a cruel light.

"Is it so?" he muttered, going close up to Julian, and laying his hands heavily on his shoulders, so as to bring his gaze to bear upon his face;—"is this the explanation? Your traitorous lie has robbed me of my just revenge! You have pawned your honor to hide your brother's infamy, and you have pawned it in vain! Mine is a righteous vengeance, and shall reach him at the world's end. I warned you in old times that I would never spare the one for the sake of the other, and now I hold your cheat on my credulity as only second to his felony. Would you attempt denial? Your word where Harry Karslake was concerned would not have a feather's weight!"

He was hoarse with rage and excitement; his detestation of the younger Karslake had the intensity of a passion, and no disappointment of his life had been keener than when death robbed him, as he had thought, of his power of legal punishment.

"If denial could avail," said Karslake, freeing himself from his grasp and meeting his infuriated gaze with dauntless courage, "I should possibly attempt it, and settle the wrong with my own conscience; but I perceive it would be in vain. Hear me speak," he continued, addressing Helstone and his wife: "there shall be no lack of explanation now."

He went up to Sybil's side and took her hand.

"No pledges you have given me in the past shall bind you for the future; you shall be free to make a new departure on the grounds of what I am going to say,—free from shadow of blame or thought of reproach. Simply, the case stands thus. I have kept my brother's secret, not, alas! to my own hurt alone, because the paramount obligation of my life was fixed as devotion to his interests. I swore before God to my dying mother to sacrifice my own welfare absolutely to his, should it come into collision with it; and it was the force of this boyish oath that helped me to endurance and resistance under those circumstances of our early life so bitterly complained of by Mr. Anstruther. Do not think," he added, "that I claim any merit for this: as circumstances stood, it was the most rudimentary form of duty."

He paused, whether to give the opportunity of reply or to rally his own taxed endurance seemed uncertain, but no one spoke. Mr. Anstruther stood at the window with his back towards the speaker, gnawing his lip and even his nails, in the extremity of his repressed excitement. Helstone, for the first time, sat with lowered gaze and with his hand shading his eyes. Sybil alone looked up with a gaze full of tenderness and pity.

"I should never have dared to woo you, Sybil," he continued, "while this responsibility rested upon me. Nothing would be gained by dwelling on the penalties my pledge exacted, but I would not have asked any woman to share them with me. When at last I came to you with the story of my love, I believed that I was free, accepting as proved the report of Harry's shipwreck at sea. At that time also I was perfectly ignorant of what the last act of his life had been. I am not quite sure that I should have considered a crime washed out by death, and consequently buried in oblivion, a sufficient obstacle against trying to win the woman I adored; but I did not know it. When I did, our engagement was so far advanced, and circumstances had become so complicated, that a rupture would have been difficult. I had even begun to hope that your happiness was involved in mine, and, unable to forecast events, I thought you need never know aught beyond the fact that I had once a brother. Here was an error of judgment, perhaps of conscience too: had I not made it, the shame and anguish of this hour would have been mine alone." His voice fell, and a flush came over his face.

"I thank God," said Sybil, in a low tone, "that we are so bound together that it is not only my privilege but my duty to share it."

"Ah! but there is a point beyond which even your generous co-operation must not go. But hear me out, Sybil: I want to justify your trust at every point. The day that Mr. Helstone first saw me and Nell Trevelyan together was the day when she brought me the news that Harry had effected his escape from the wreck and was still a living man. It was his presence in her house, and the necessity of providing for his safety, that took me to the bedside of their sick child, where I again renewed the vows of my earlier years, pledging myself to keep the secret of his existence inviolate. That *is all that* I have to say in the way of self-vindication: what remains——"

Mr. Anstruther turned round and looked at him at this point.

"What remains," he said, interrupting him, "is an acknowledgment on my part that I have done you an injustice, and wish to recall what I spoke in my anger just now. It will not make a jot of difference to my action towards your brother, who shall stand in the dock sooner or later and take the wages of his felony; but I am glad to be able to revert to my former good opinion of yourself. Also, Mrs. Karslake seems to me true metal enough not to visit on your head the awkward fact that in marrying you she may probably have a convict for a brother-in-law."

Helstone dropped his hand to observe how Karslake bore the brutal plainness of this speech. It did not seem to affect him much, except in regard to its impression upon his wife. He was looking at her with an expression of grave solicitude, in which there was as little of shame or humiliation as of irritation or anger, and as he met the wistful, yearning tenderness of her eyes he yielded to an impulse he had checked before, and, going up to her, took both her hands in his.

"It is quite true," he said, "I have brought this possible ignominy upon you, but I know you acquit me of doing it wittingly, and I shall never ask or rather suffer you to share it. Even to you, my wife, beloved as you alone know how I have loved you, my first duty is not due. I am bound to my brother's fate by an obligation without limit or reserve, and the more so as I have failed to keep his secret and finally betrayed the trust that I have labored so hard to redeem. Sybil," he added, more passionately, and straining her hands for a moment against his breast, "gauge the bitterness of my self-reproach when I tell you I would sacrifice our love, could I alone pay the penalty, to have secured Harry's safety! Having lost it, at least I cast in my lot with his: I see no room in my life for any personal indulgences."

"How am I to understand you, Julian?"

There was a vibration of anguish in her voice that cut him to the quick, but it was not effectual to move him from his purpose. He did not even shrink from meeting the reproachful pathos of her glance.

"I simply mean that I will not ask you to endure the life that is *before me*. I shall join my brother, with the intention of urging him to surrender himself to justice, and, if I succeed, shall of course identify myself, so far as possible, with every step in the process of his condemnation. But, that failing, —and it will fail,—I shall share his expatriation and help his concealment, the only consolation left being the effort to save him from sinking lower to a deeper shame. Would you be equal to this hard co-operation, this detestable companionship? And if your magnanimity carried you so far, I would not accept the ruin of your fair life. No, dear: you shall return to the pure family affection and literary ardors from which I had so hard a matter to win you: would to God I had failed!"

He bent over her and kissed her forehead, not with passion, but with the calm tenderness of an absolute renunciation. Then he turned to Mr. Austruther.

"Oblige me," he said, "by telling Mr. Helstone and my wife the extent of Harry's offence. Felony is a wide term: they may think him guilty of a worse crime than he has committed."

"That is scarcely possible," replied the old merchant, dryly, "but I will meet your wishes so far as I reasonably can."

As he spoke he drew out his pocket-book, slowly opened it, and took out carefully the forged cheque.

"I have carried this about with me ever since it was placed in my hands, but with small hope of turning it to account as I am able to do now. Shall I explain?"

He approached the table where Helstone was sitting, and, spreading it before him, indicated the point: the addition of a naught had multiplied the original sum tenfold; what other manipulation had been required had been executed with consummate dexterity.

Helstone nodded comprehension, and then glanced towards Karslake. A sudden purpose was forming in his mind.

"One moment," he said. "I am professionally interested in so delicate a misdemeanor: suffer me to test the forgery by the light."

He rose, as if with the intention of approaching the window, but as he passed the fire he suddenly crushed together the morsel of paper he held, and dropped it into the fervent flame.

"I have wronged you," he said, turning his pale face to *Karslake*, "as grossly as one man can wrong another. Accept my reparation."

There was a moment's pause of suspense, and then Mr. Anstruther, with an inarticulate cry of rage, made as if he would have flung himself upon him in absolute personal encounter. Helstone coolly evaded the attack.

"I own," he said, "I am liable to any reprisals at your hands; only spare me the humiliating defeat such thews and sinews as yours would inflict! I have been guilty of an unpardonable outrage, and deserve and expect no quarter. My only regret is that I possibly anticipated your own action."

Sybil came forward, and knelt at his feet.

"Oh, forgive him," she pleaded, "not only Mr. Helstone, but Harry Karslake. Think what he has suffered already, what shame and agony this bold deed has spared us all!"

Her words distilled like dew; her pathetic beauty moved him more than he would acknowledge.

"Your righteous vengeance," she went on, "would have ruined three lives, instead of one. Is it not better as it is? The punishment Harry deserved would have been endured in its fulness by Julian alone. Think of the long penance he has suffered, and accept it as his brother's atonement."

He pushed her from him, but not roughly, and, gathering himself together, rose and glared at Helstone.

"Your deed is actionable," he said, "and I will strain the law to punish it with its utmost rigor. I will subpœna Julian Karslake and his wife as witnesses: he acknowledges the obligation of an oath, and we will put it to the test. You will find he has gained nothing by your fraud. I will not be balked of my revenge."

He spoke harshly, but there was a visible decrease of excitement in his manner.

"Nothing could condone my offence," answered Helstone, "but the irresistible impulse of the moment. It seemed the one way, however unjustifiable, out of an inextricable difficulty. I saw that an appeal to your generosity would have failed, but we all learn to accept the inevitable. I believe time and reflection will reconcile you to your loss: otherwise, I must bear my punishment."

Anstruther turned and looked at Karslake.

"Am I not to be insulted by your congratulations, too? or is your triumph too deep for words?"

"Mine is a very mixed feeling. I am like a man from whose shoulders a burden has fallen that he had nerved himself to carry all his life, but who doubts his right of deliverance. There will be little satisfaction to my mind in this accidental reprieve, unless you endorse it by your fullest forgiveness."

"Towards yourself? That I have already done. Towards your brother? I have lost the power to hurt him."

He spoke with concentrated bitterness. Karslake looked at him with a comprehension and sympathy that did more to assuage his just displeasure than expostulation or entreaty.

"I cannot help acknowledging that Mr. Helstone has gone beyond right and justice in the step he has taken, and has robbed you of a satisfaction you were justified in exacting. Let me, at least, press upon you that measure of pecuniary satisfaction you once refused, but which is now more than ever binding on my conscience; and for the rest, all real nobleness and sacrifice in this matter still remain with you."

He paused, eying the stern, rugged countenance with something of the wistful, deprecating solicitude of his boyhood.

"You say you have lost the power of proving Harry's guilt. Go a step higher than the forced acceptance of Mr. Helstone's action, and abandon the desire to do so. Suffer me to write to him and tell him you are willing to forgive him under certain conditions. His welfare is as much now as ever my concern."

Anstruther tried to harden his heart, but in vain: the fairness and directness of Karslake's appeal commended itself to his mind, and as he looked into the pale harassed face of the speaker, and weighed the effects of the protracted ordeal he had endured, the latent tenderness he entertained for him won the final victory.

"The conditions, at least, shall be of my own dictation," he said, grimly, "and without appeal from your fanatical sense of duty. I am overmatched by villany and sophistry, but I will take my stand on one or two points. First, you must take back your resignation from the bishop, and return to reason and common sense; secondly, if Harry Karslake is to receive condonation for his crime, it must be on the understanding that he returns to this country to marry Nell Trevelyan and takes her and her brat back to the colony with him. England *can never* hold us both! You must strictly keep your own counsel, as to this nefarious loss of evidence, till the knot is tied between him and his girl, and he pledges himself to expatriation, or he will cheat us yet. Do you consent?"

"I have no option but to consent," replied Karslake, grasping his hand gratefully, "and could not desire better terms. I will secure his interests in New Zealand."

Mr. Anstruther interrupted him with a satirical laugh. "Doubtless! and will find it necessary to visit him at the antipodes, to see for yourself that they are duly secured,—that Nell Trevelyan says her prayers, and that the boy is being reared in the way he should go! Those points I will leave you to settle with your wife and your conscience. I must go now,—a beaten man! But for all that, Mrs. Karslake, I shall come and see you sometimes."

He moved to the door to depart, and Sybil accompanied him out of the room.

When they were alone, the two men looked at each other. Helstone spoke.

"I knew he would only bluster and give in, but it was a bold step, which only success could justify. After a time, Karslake, I may ask for your friendship. With such a temper as yours, I make sure of your forgiveness. I will prove my good will by wishing you all the happiness you deserve."

He waited for no reply, grasped strenuously the hand the other extended to him, and went out.

In the hall he met Sybil.

"I will leave it to your husband to persuade you to forgive me. What more shall I say? That I give you free permission to repair my blunders by your devotion? Child, I am almost willing to own he is worthy of you. For the rest, I am going to Esher, to win Miss Harrison's heart by the tale I have to tell. Good-by!"

THE END.

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